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NOVEMBER

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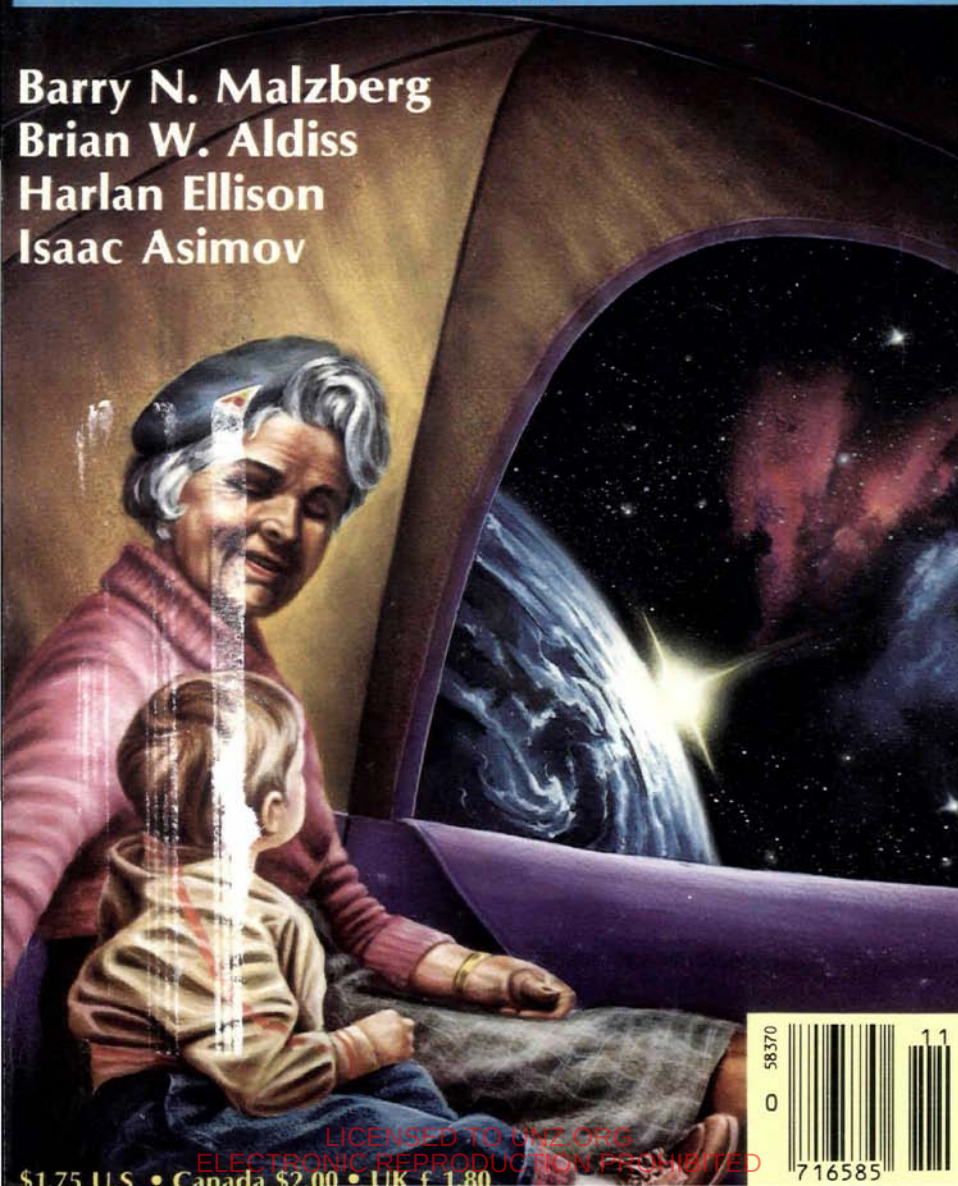

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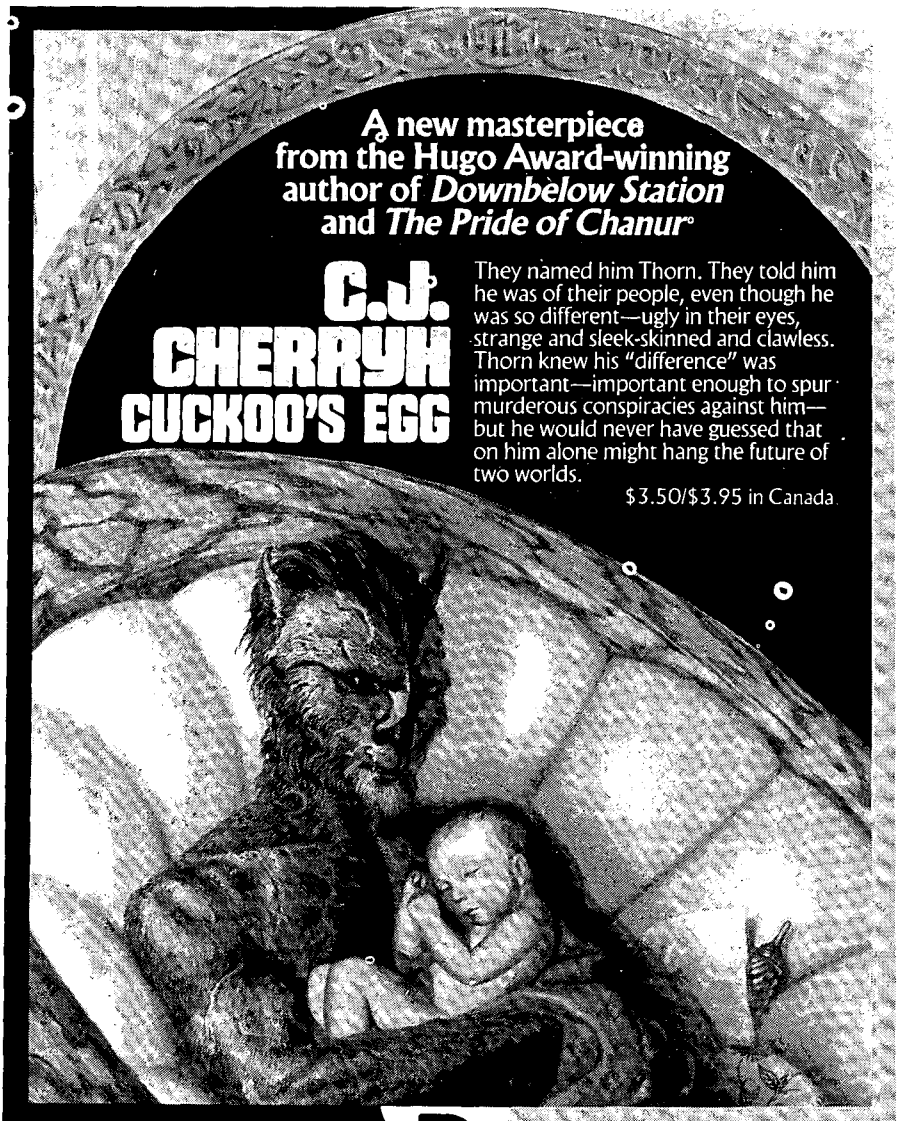
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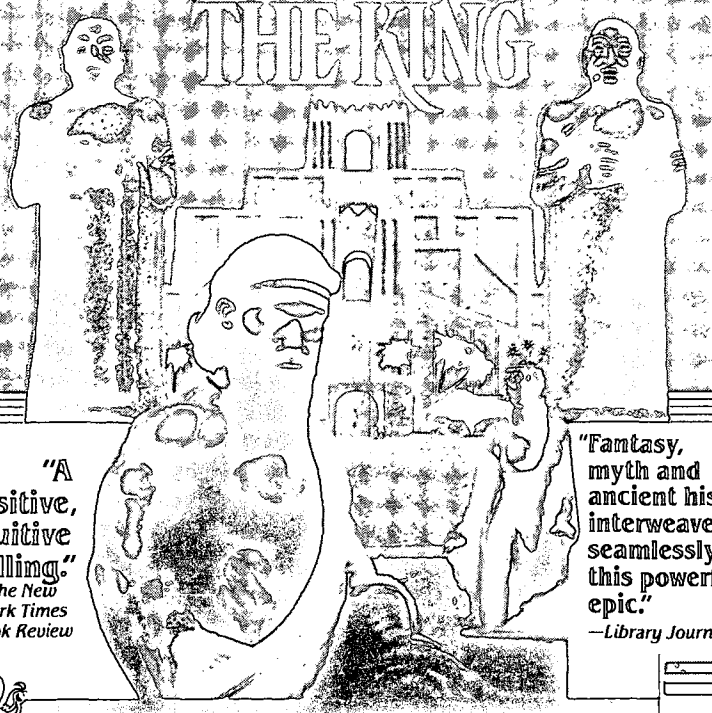

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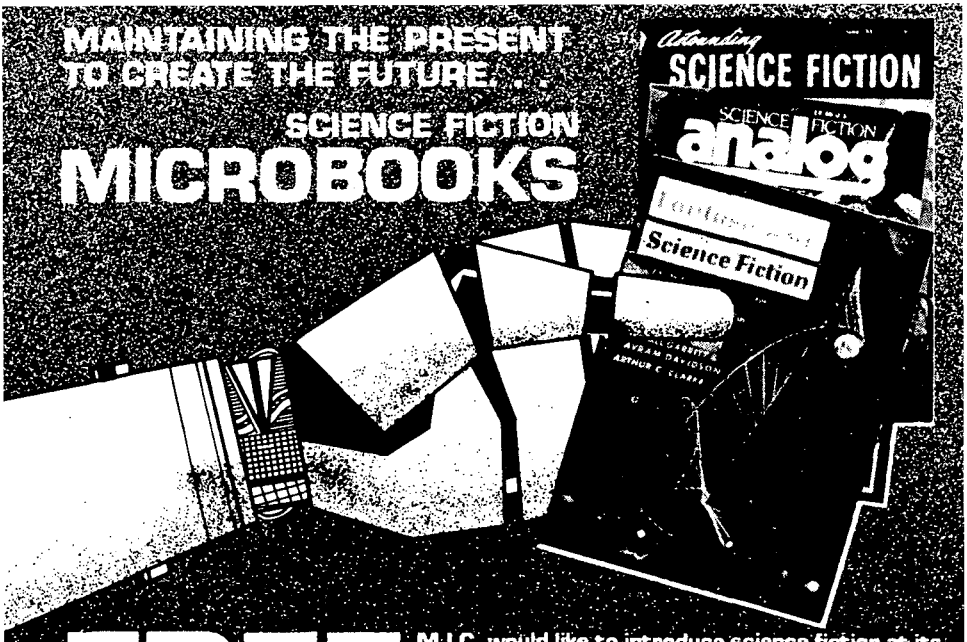

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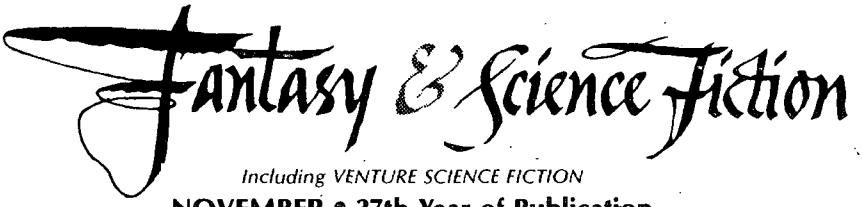

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Ellen Gilchrist was the winner of the 1985 American Book Award for fiction, for her collection VICTORY OVER JAPAN (Little, Brown). Here, she offers a fine new fantasy about Mrs. Coleman and her grandson Sam and their remarkable journeys in an old tent.

The Green Tent

BY
ELLEN GILCHRIST

Mrs. Coleman's son, Sammy, was always fighting with his wife. There was nothing anyone could do about it. They were too beautiful to be married to anyone, much less each other. Jealousy ate at them all day long like a flame. If one of them had it banked for a moment, the other one was feeding it.

Mrs. Coleman stayed right in the middle of the trouble. How could she escape? It was too small a town for secrets. Besides, there was her grandson, Sam, aged three. Mrs. Coleman adored him. If two days went by and she didn't see him, she had visions of him, his serious little face would dance before her face. Kiss, kiss, kiss, the vision would insist. No, she could not stay away.

As soon as she would pull up in the driveway of Sammy and Donna's house (Donna was the name of her daughter-in-law), Sam would come running out and beg to get in the car. Then she would go inside and have to hear the latest news of Donna and Sammy's fights.

Sam didn't mind the fights. They were all he knew. The more his parents fought, the more they left him alone. The more cookies he could eat without being noticed, the more Cokes he could drink, the more Mrs. Coleman came to take him off in her blue car. Sam adored Mrs. Coleman as much as she adored him. He loved her cool, clean house; her soft bed; her homemade custard; her gardens; her green tent.

It was a tent she had used when she was young to camp in the Rocky Mountains. It was lightweight and easy to assemble and looked like an igloo when it was up. It was a wonderful color of green, the color of spring leaves. Anytime he wanted it, Sam said, "tent," and Mrs. Coleman would open a closet and take the tent down from a shelf and set it up on the living room floor; and the two of them would climb into it and

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zip up all the zippers; and Sam would put the colander on his head, and Mrs. Coleman would put a French beret on her head; and the two of them would stretch their legs out in front of them, sitting side by side, very close; and Mrs. Coleman would say, "Where do you want to go today, Sam?" and Sam would say, "Stars."

They would press their hands down at their sides and keep their arms and legs tight against each other, and the tent would ascend a few inches off the floor and move into the dining room and out the French doors, which they always left open for that purpose, and out onto the patio to a cleared place between the apple trees; and the tent would begin to fly, at an angle at first so they could have a look at the spring fields, so they could remember where they had been; and then, just as the tent passed over the lake, it would stiffen and tighten and solidify and the seams would bond and the oxygen come on, and they would loosen their arms and shake hands. "Good work," Mrs. Coleman would say. "Thank you," Sam would reply.

Then the tent would begin its real ascent, spiraling up out of the atmosphere and into the spring sky, moving up among the stars. Sam would push a button on his shoe, and the rain cover would fold back so they could have a better look at things. Although there was really not all that much to see, just light and darkness and infinity. What Mrs. Coleman liked was the sound, which was a harmony stretching out in all directions, and she would open her mouth and begin to sing with it, long notes that blended into the darkness and the light. Sam was a wonderful traveling companion. He never thought, Why doesn't she stop singing? Why doesn't she be quiet? Sometimes she sang songs with words. "Oh, we're off to the Hamburg show. See the elephants and the wild kangaroos. And we'll all stick together, in rain or stormy weather, and we'll all see the whole show through." That song always made Sam hungry, for he was too young to have heard of Hamburg, Germany, and thought it was a song about going to McDonald's.

They never stayed too long among the stars — an hour or two or three at most — then they would return and unzip the tent and put everything away, and Mrs. Coleman would cook supper and perhaps Sam would spend the night. This went on several times a week for the months of spring.

Space travel was good for Mrs. Coleman. The gray that had begun to come into her hair was going away as if it had never been. A line of wrinkles beside her mouth was smoothing itself away. It's the antigravity, she decided. It's from leaving the atmosphere.

One day in June, Mrs. Coleman went over to her son's house to pick up Sam, and her daughter-in-law took her back to the back of the house to have a

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talk. Oh, my God, Mrs. Coleman thought. She's going to tell me something about Sammy's being mean to her. Oh, why do I have to listen to this at my age? Still, she smiled kindly and allowed herself to be taken to a back bedroom. She sat down on the bed. "We have a real problem," Donna said. Her eyes were red. She had been crying. "We have a big problem. I'm hoping you can tell me what to do."

Mrs. Coleman folded her hands together and waited to hear about the latest scrap. "It's about Sam," Donna said. "Something's wrong with him. He's stopped growing. I took him to the doctor yesterday. No, it's worse than that. He's gotten shorter. He's lost an inch in three months. It might be something in his spine. We don't know what to think. Dr. Harris was at a loss. Sam's started wetting his pants again. And begging for his pacifier. I don't know what's happened. I don't know what's gone wrong. What did I do? I've done something wrong. Oh, I don't know what to think . . ." She was crying.

She threw herself into Mrs. Coleman's arms. "We'll have to take him to Mayo's. We'll have to leave tomorrow. I haven't told Sammy yet. He's going to kill me. He's going to say it's all my fault. Sam's shrinking, Dolly. The baby's shrinking."

"Oh, my," Mrs. Coleman said. "Stop crying, Donna. I know what's wrong. I think I know the trouble. I think I know what to do."

"What is it?" Donna said, sitting up, holding Mrs. Coleman's arms. "Tell me what it is. What do you know?"

"It's a genetic thing," Mrs. Coleman said. "People in our family get it. It goes away. It lasts only a few months in the spring. Then it goes away. It will be all right. He will start to grow again."

"But what about the inch he lost?" He's already lost an inch."

"Not really," Mrs. Coleman said. "It only seems that way. It's only temporary."

"Did you come to get him? Are you going to take him off today?"

"Not today. I have some work to do today. Don't worry about it anymore, Donna. I promise you I know what to do. I'll make you a tonic. A special recipe I used to make for Sammy. It will be all right. I'll bring it by. I'll bring it by tonight."

She drove home through the June heat. She parked her car underneath an old elm tree. A new moon was in the afternoon sky. It was very clear and sharp, like a sickle. I'll bet that's where they got the idea for the sickle, Mrs. Coleman thought. She was always thinking things like that.

She went into the house and sat down at the dressing room table and looked at her face. Her face looked wonderful with the wrinkles gone. Maybe they won't come back, she thought. Of course they will come back. I could go alone. But he's the one that knows the way. Besides, it would be too lonely

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up there all alone. She sighed at the thought of being up there without his fat little arms and thighs to push against her own when they came to the cold places in between the stars.

I have to cut it up, she thought. I have to cut it up and plant it. She went into the living room and opened the closet and took it out and spread it out on the floor and looked at it. It was a wonderful tent, not a tear in it. It had cost two hundred dollars when such tents were new. When her husband was still alive. They had bought it one afternoon on a lark and thrown it into the car and gone up to the lake and set it up and made love inside it like young lovers. A hundred, two hundred, three hundred times they must have taken that tent to the wilderness to sleep on the earth and wake with the sun.

It looked so harmless lying on the living room floor. It looked like any old green tent. I could hide it, she thought, in the garage, in a box marked DANGER. But why would I save anything that must be marked DANGER? Anyone might find it. I might die in an accident and someone would find it. He might find it. And remember how to use it. No, there is no help for it. I must cut it up and plant it. THAT IS WHAT I HAVE TO DO.

Then she got out her pinking shears, as they seemed more formal, and all afternoon she cut the tent into strips two inches wide and packed the strips in a wooden box, and then she nailed the box shut and carried it out to a corner of the yard, a high place under cedar trees, and she got out a shovel and dug and dug until she thought her arms would break. Then she put the box down into the hole and covered it with dirt and sprinkled a package of radish seeds on top and stepped back and heaved a sigh.

It was almost dark. The skies were pink and purple and lavender and every shade of gray and blue. It was the time of day when men and women gather in their houses to tell their stories and eat their meals and wait for the stars to appear.

Mrs. Coleman went back into her house and took down a jar of grape juice and a jar of cranberry juice and a jar of apple juice and mixed it all together with a stick of cinnamon and put some into a mason jar and screwed the top on and marked it TONIC. Then she picked up the phone and called her daughter-in-law. "I have the tonic," she said. "I'll bring it over. Tell him I'm coming. I want to talk to him about this summer. I have big plans for the summer, Donna. I'm going to teach that child to read. Then I'm going to teach him how to swim."

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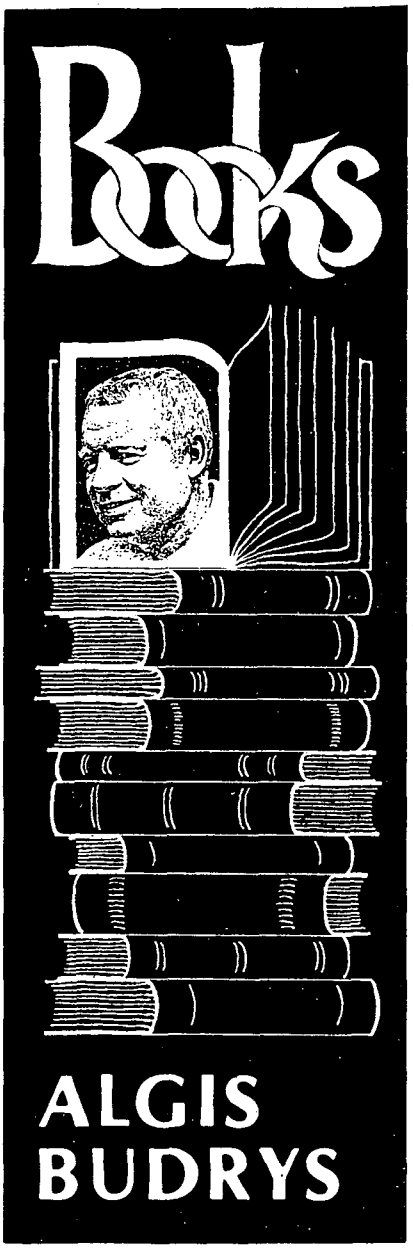

Free Live Free, Gene Wolfe, Tor, $16.95

The Book of Sorrows, Walter Wangerin, Jr., Harper & Row, $15.95

Skeleton Crew, Stephen King, Putnam, $18.95

There are all sorts of Gene Wolfe. For instance, although the author of *Free Live Free* is clearly related to the man who wrote *The Book of The New Sun*, he has I think long been a hotel detective in some coastal American city, whereas the Wolfe of *The Shadow of The Torturer*, et al, had obviously spent his entire life as Prime Minister of a complexly ancient grand duchy in Carpathia.

Come to think of it, those may not be particularly diverse occupations. But one does dress differently for them.

To the point: You are going to have to enjoy this one for what it is, rather than for whatever SF genre you might favor. It is not readily classifiable, though it does contain an abbreviated advertisement from the back pages of a newspaper.

But everything resembles something in some respects, you protest. Within the ballpark, what is *Free Live Free* like, you ask me. Reply herewith, may it be of some use:

The milieu of this brilliantly tuned tale much recalls the grimily urban locales favored by W.R. Burnett or Dashiell Hammett. It is, however, a science fiction political thriller.

There is a petty crime in it, con-

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tinually, as part of Wolfe's engagingly unjudgmental description of human pettiness in his characters. Too, part of its growing unrelaxable deft grip on the reader is the evolving suspicion that any moment we might escalate up to some sort of precipitating murder or robbery caper, on the classic model as laid down in *The Asphalt Jungle* or *Red Harvest*. On the other hand, one of the principal characters, Madame Serpentina — devastating in a black Merry Widow undergarment, or nude and unguented — is quite reliant on her powers as a witch, and seems capable of appearing and disappearing in shadowy corners. (At which times she is more conventionally clad, one regrets.)

But there is a scruffy though immensely dignified private detective who does various ingenious cheap tricks in a persistent effort to learn what has happened to old Benjamin Free, his landlord in a condemned building. Some of Jim Stubbs's motivation in that matter has to do with Free's mysterious "treasure," which may or may not be something tangible, but serves quite well as a Maltese Falcon. Other contenders for this Maguffin: the glass-eyed Ozzie Barnes, salesman of novelty items in the whoopee cushion category, and Candy Garth, the hooker with a heart as big as her hips. All of them have been attracted by Free's ad offering rent-free lodging, a measure on his part to prevent his house from being urban-renewed into the ground, treasure and all.

To this opening cast, one adds a cop fully worthy of reviving the term "flatfoot," and then an increasing number of preppy young ladies with devious ways, plus the publisher of an occult magazine, and a narrative style one gradually realizes is crossed with a sort of wit last employed at the hands of James Branch Cabell. The laughter here comes right from the belly upward, rich, resonant and deep; these people are what we all are, and Wolfe knows us, is one of us, loves us. The tone of his voice here is that of someone who can barely contain his tears and laughter while moving this cast toward its denouement with a touch one hasn't seen since Frank Capra stopped making films. But contain them he does, as deadpan as anyone who ever produced a gold piece from behind a child's ear.

A person would have to be a churl not to love this part of the book — that is, by far the biggest as well as the best part of the book. But this is also the part that in hardly any way resembles either a novel of science fiction or — despite Madame Serpentina — one of fantasy, and already there are churlish rumblings that this is a defect.

In fact, the defect is about to happen; the closing section of the book. This wordage is replete with fetching details, especially if one is a buff of mid-century airplanes, pluto-

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crat-conspiracy stories of the Richard Condon sort, and time-travel rationales. And I am; I plead guilty to all of the above. My complaint is that after all those wonderful scenes in the one mode, the intrusion of gun-toting colonels, three-piece anonymes in unmarked cars, secret airfields and even the confrontation scene aboard the impossibly huge radar-transparent airplane that hasn't landed anywhere in decades, are like what would happen if one substituted the last reel of *Live and Let Die* for the last reel of *You Can't Take it With You*. A more perceptive critic might appreciate that for a telling Absurdist tactic, but I tend toward being a sentimental slob. I wanted the parts of Serpentina, Stubb, Ozzie and Candy, and even old Ben Free to continue being played by the artists who first brought them to life for me. I can't help feeling that Wolfe could have written an equally rationalized but more harmonized sort of ending.

But this attitude presupposes that I see Wolfe as a good writer . . . a writer good enough to stand among the few living literary artists whose apparent mistakes are in many ways as enjoyable and rewarding as their apparent successes. And, indeed, upon reflection it's possible to see how the ordinariness — the meticulously shown ordinariness — of this fascinating cast of tacky people is tested and further illuminated by their response to the genre rhodomontades of the book's closing events. It's possible to see that Wolfe may have been intentionally making an even more extended point about the integrity of ring-around-the-collar people, provided only that their hearts be kind. Certainly, when he recompenses their steadfastness at the end of the book, he is probably underscoring some such judgment. So while I still think the book has problems created by its abrupt lapse into hugger-mugger, I don't think they're simpleminded problems, and I can readily continue to feel that Wolfe is an amazingly craftsmanly creator as well as an uncommonly original artist.

But that doesn't answer the people who object to this book because they can't find or can't recognize anything SFnal about it until nine tenths of its wordage has gone by. Their complaint is quite different from mine; in fact, they're unhappy because they want the giant plane in Chapter One, and the SF plot rationale within a few words thereafter.

This probably means these readers want a stock set of characters, too, for surely there wouldn't be much leisure in which to individuate them if they had to spend most of the text ducking submachinegun fire. Yet if you ask them, the Sf-cravers would probably deny that, and some would go into the stock verbal fugue about how it's something of a shame SF is a "literature of ideas" and thus can't create characters. It is not, in fact,

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the "idea" content that prevents characterization, it's the frequently seen restriction of "ideas" to a repertoire so old that many of them have turned to rotten burlap and will barely carry any weight at all.

I don't know how much thinking along these lines Wolfe might have done, if any, and if he did do any, I don't know how much of the outcome might be reflected in the nature of this book. But I am beginning to wonder whether the next big intellectual division within the SF community will be between those who see all literary techniques as being admissible — and welcome — in the field, and those who will insist on the good old insignia bravely displayed on every page, like the U.S. flag especially large and eye-catching out in front of the discount shopping center.

Well, whatever, this book is already quite high on the list of Nebula nominations, which means that a good proportion of those professional SF writers who belong to the SFWA and are moved to make nominations are impressed by *Free Live Free*, and might even be influenced by it in the preparation of their own future work. Or it might mean they liked Madame Serpentina.

This Tor hardcover edition, by the way, is the first mass-sale edition, and also the first edition of this particular version of the *Free Live Free* text. The earlier Ziesing Brothers limited collectors' edition is somewhat longer; David G. Hartwell, who brought in the Tor edition, describes the present version as "revised, tightened" and "the finished work." Could be; in any case, I don't imagine it's in most respects qualitatively different.

I will say I liked the Ziesings' jacket a lot better as a piece of decorative artwork. The Tor one, by "Enric," is smoothly competent and quite commercial, but he is the sort of painter who refers to movie stills rather than live models, and that has always disturbed me. In this particular instance, Jim Stubb is depicted as William Holden. You will have gathered, I hope, that this is not only ludicrous but perhaps insulting.

Anyway. Walter Wangerin, Jr.'s sequel to *The Book of The Dun Cow* is *The Book of Sorrows*, and if you loved the one, you may well love this one, although it is exceedingly well named. The cheerful parts come from deciding that the crushed babies were a test of your capacity to understand the nature of the abiding love represented by the all-giving cow. In most other respects, the book is relentlessly gory, intentionally disheartening, and graphically meticulous in its cataloguing of corrupted tissues, ichors, plasmas, exudates and excreta. It's wormy.

The central plot has to do with Chauntecleer's foredoomed quest to reclaim the heroic dog, Mundo Cani,

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from the evil Wyrm, Mundo Cani having finally been all that stood between the excruciatingly clever and puissant Wyrm and victory over the good creatures of the Earth.

Book of the Dun Cow got Wangerin a National Book Award, which it certainly deserved on the basis of originality and the quality of Wangerin's prose. It has been hailed in many quarters in many terms reserved for excellent SF writers who have not gotten themselves tainted with the SF media brush, and one can hardly blame Wangerin for that, either. In any event, many SF media readers undoubtedly read it in either its trade edition or its reprint, and enjoyed it. Of those who tried it, I would expect many to be *F&SF* people.

I was somewhat troubled by it, but decided what the hell. I am more troubled by its sequel.

Both books recall the Medieval beast-fable mode, in which barnyard and forest creatures act out moral dramas on points too delicate for human representation. In Wangerin's construct, Chauntecleer the rooster, and his duly deferential but quite clearheaded lady wife, Pertelote, are so to speak the lord and lady of the manor. They set the tone — directly for the other domestic creatures within their purview, as well as for their vermin, and indirectly for all such nominally wild creatures as might impinge upon the domestic arrangements of the Middle Ages. That is to say, on anything that might be hunted for food, and anything that might prey on the flocks of the holding. They see to the spiritual condition of their household each day; ordinarily it is Chauntecleer who sings Matins and Compline and the other periods of the day, but the lady Pertelote can substitute for him at need.

All this has a certain charm. It's erratic; as if Mundo Cani as a name for the dog weren't enough, the seven particular baby mice are named for the days of the week in German — Sonntag, Montag, etc. — whereas the other creatures have names that are far more conventional in this context. Some of this is punning, some of this is Disneyesque whimsy, and some of it appears to be straight narrative furniture, but bent to the service of a complex religious allegory.

The dun cow, for example, is not named Elsie — she is not named at all, nor characterized; she appears to have an IQ of about 50 — but she drips with all the placid overflowing instinctive goodness that myth commonly ascribes to the irredeemably bovine. With her generous secretions, she makes things as right as they can be for such diverse creatures as a bereaved coyote and a desperate rooster hideously infested with worms and descended into monomania, and if that is the allegory I take it to be, I believe it's not only unattractive but at least schismatic. Wangerin is a graduate of a major seminary, and a

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former inner city pastor. If I were Mother Church, I'd be as impressed by *The Book of Sorrows* as anyone paging through the works of Heironymous Bosch, but I'm not sure I'd be flattered.

One flees to Stephen King's new short-story collection, *Skeleton Crew*; by comparison, it has the gore that refreshes.

King (who makes a nice bow to Edward Ferman in his introductory text here), is a pretty damned good writer, no pun intended, when he has time and — I think — a little bit of luck. His novels are always well founded not only on a shrewd commercial assessment of what the market might bear but also, I believe, on what will frighten their author. In that sense, he does lay a little bit of himself on the line each time, and in that way he is irrevocably superior to his imitators. But the novels then, taken as entire things, go through one clever turn after another in their narratives, to the point where merchandising and sapience overwhelm the little boy who squirmed in the dark, and even the grown man who realizes that all those pangs were never outgrown and discharged, they were merely suppressed.

In his short stories — particularly the ones written in offhand moments as distinct from commissioned ones — King is often less conscious of his obligations to the mercantile establishment; the prisoner is more assertive against his confines.

I think "The Body," from his four-story collection, *Different Seasons*, is one of the best American stories of our time. It would be even better if it did not interpolate the salvaged text of what I take to be a couple of very early actual King short stories, which are presented as the new work of the teen-aged protagonist. But those stories, crude as they are, point to a King who might have been — that is, to someone all we genre readers would have enjoyed and respected, and sent off to his reward at last, and tried to explain to the world at large, which would never have heard of him.

That is the world's loss. It will read *Skeleton Crew* as a sort of stop-gap fix while it waits for the next novel, and we, more fortunate, can see it quite another way.

This thick book collects 22 stories taken from various times in his career. Some are quite recent — "The Ballad of The Flexible Bullet," from these pages — and some go back to before anyone but Beneficial Finance had ever heard of Stephen King. A few — very few — are just padding. A fair number are excellently conceived generic work that fully delivers what the reader expects: "The Mist," "The Monkey," "The Rat," "Uncle Otto's Truck," "The Man Who Would Not Shake Hands" (which establishes a canon also containing "The Breathing Method" from *Different Seasons*).

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Some transcend their origins; "Nona" is in one sense a very ordinary variation on the demon woman tale, but it belongs in a canon with few examples, most of them films, of which *Bonnie and Clyde* is the most prominent and the most shallow. There is enormous potential power in a really good road story about a male/female sociopathic pair who synergize on a level beyond their almost incidental sexual liaison; the only truly successful one I've even seen was an early 1960s pornographic paperback whose title and author I've long since forgotten and which of course was turned into Wheaties cartons long ago. Aside from that phantom rival, however, "Nona" is the best until it gets back into its intended skin because it needs to end as a short story. Perhaps someday, when King is truly secure, a venture at greater length might be interesting.

Some of the other pieces in *Skeleton Crew* are almost like "The Body" in the sense that they are entertaining not only in their scenarios but in the resonances they evoke among the less primitive emotions. There's "Ballad," of course, but also "Mrs. Todd's Shortcut," and "The Reach." There are two stories involving a milkman, of which "Big Wheels" is a fine realistic story about bustout drinking in the blue-collar auto world, and "Morning Deliveries," nothing like it, is one of the most successful pieces of pararealistic "experimental" writing I've seen in or out of a literary quarterly.

All in all, this "stopgap" is a dandy collection in the best sense; no one reader could respond equally to all the work here, but there is bound to be something memorable in here for every one of us.

What I personally feel most of all for King is affection; he has not turned his back on us, and because he is one of us it's gratifying to observe he has not turned his back on himself, either.

I cannot leave this without pointing to some of the latest in King's long series of curious dyslexias: Just as there is no such thing as a "Hearst" shifter linkage ("The Body") or a spring-loaded Pinto carburetor needle valve *(Cujo)*, there never was a four-door Scout vehicle ("The Mist"). Also, the fellow you call Tom Hagen was Thomas Heggen, author of *Mister Roberts*, and typewriters have only one platen; it's the cylindrical black sleeve that surfaces the roller — those things you refer to as "platens," Steve, are the keys.

Keep stroking them.

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ACE SCIENCE FICTION

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The final volume in Brian Aldiss's wonderfully received Helliconia trilogy, HELLICONIA WINTER, was published in April 1985. A collection of his short stories titled A SEASON IN FLIGHT will shortly be published by Antheneum; here is a preview of one of the new stories from that book.

You Never Asked My Name

BY
BRIAN ALDISS

In the days beyond the future, a town existed on a rocky peninsula some two days' journey south from where Athens had once stood.

The peninsula began with a swollen knuckle of rock and tapered off like a pointing finger into the blue sea. Along its spine grew fragrant pines the shape of opened umbrellas, cacti, cypresses, vines, and olive trees flecked with fungus like mildewed lace. Where the peninsula ended, at the very nail of the finger, stood the small city-state called Tolan. Its inhabitants called it The Perfect Place.

The human beings who lived in Tolan, in their ordered society, counted themselves fortunate. They considered themselves safe from the post-bellum wars that raged elsewhere over the face of the ruined world. They had escaped the worst physical effects of The Deterrence. Nevertheless, their minds were less unscathed than their bodies by all that had happened.

From a distance Tolan looked like a toy. Everything about it seemed artificial, from its miniature palaces to its tiny walled vineyards. The people themselves, aware of their brittle survival, walked like dolls.

No two houses in Tolan stood on the same level. The steepness of the hillsides precluded it. The roof of one house came level with the herb strip of the next. Their white walls marched down to the sea amid broom and boulder, and stood at angles to each other like a family whose members have quarreled. A stranger arriving by mule over the mountains from the ruined world would come first to the house of Nefriki; Nefriki's house stood highest up the slopes and farthest from the center of the town.

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There Nefriki lived with his sister, Antarida. Nefriki and Antarida lived apart from the town and apart from each other.

Nefriki was a strong young man, magnificently muscled, with a ferocious head of golden hair like a lion's. His face counted as handsome, being finely molded, with blue eyes and a strong jaw, to the latter of which clung a sparse golden beard. He smiled most of the time, even when he was angry. Nefriki was generally angry. His duty was to kill people.

His sister, Antarida, was a different type of person. Her movements were as languid as Nefriki's were charged with tension. Her skin was pale. Her dark eyelashes and brows sheltered pupils of an intense gray, of a shade otherwise seen only in the eyes of cats. She was slender, her breasts and hips were small. She shaved her skull so that, in her twenty-first year, she reminded strangers at once of fetus and aged crone. Her duty was to tend the dead.

In order to defend themselves from the technological barbarism that had descended upon the rest of the planet, the people of Tolan had formed themselves into the most rigid of societies. Every family held an unalterable position in the caste system, from the lowest trawler for kelp to the highest official, from the food-washers to those so refined they were forbidden sight of their own excrement. The codes of Tolan were many, and known by all; memories were sharpened by the fact that death immediately followed any transgression. Survival lay in obedience to the law.

The utopians of Tolan had established what they called The Perfect Place: and in doing so they had killed joy.

Puritanism and sensuality were intertwined like two vines that will destroy each other. Although the men had absolute autocracy over the women, yet, by starlight, they desired only to be defiled by them in every way possible. Lies were revered, castration was frequent, sadism was beauty. Chastity was praised and all perversions practiced. To the sadness that prevails over human life, Tolan had added its own superstructure of misery, which it called utopia. Thus the ways of pre-Deterrence societies were preserved.

Sometimes refugees from the ruined world came climbing along the tumbled spine of the peninsula. Sometimes small boats sailed up the Gulf of Spetsai, attempting to moor at the harbor of Tolan.

Antarida's trade was with the dead. To her the town scavengers brought the corpses her brother had killed. Lovingly, Antarida laved her bare skull with perfumes and assumed a gown of pure white. Then, with delicate hands and mincing fingers, she set about cleansing the dead enemy. Those hands and fingers went everywhere, into the most obscure corners,

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prying, preening. The hairs of the dead were washed and numbered, their orifices filled with wax from the wild bees of the peninsula. Then the corpses were buried beneath the excreta of the women of Tolan.

For those born in The Perfect Place, the last rites were different. They, too, when life had left them, were taken into the care of Antarida for her minutest attentions. It was Antarida's fingers that were the last to invade their privacy. Burial for the native Tolanese was by water. Their bodies, laved and perfumed by the arts of Antarida, were taken to a stretch of shore preserved for such purposes.

A few feet below the clear waters of the gulf, a shelf had been built. On this shelf were iron rings, to which the deceased were secured. Mourners could stand on the shore gazing down on them. The naked corpses lay with arms spread and legs apart, as if beckoning voluptuously to the living. There were no tides in the gulf, nor had there been since the Moon, the huntress of Earth's skies, had been destroyed in The Deterrence. The dead seemed to move only by virtue of the small lapping waves, which entered them as delicately as Antarida's fingers.

Shoals of tiny fish soon destroyed the virginity of the dead. The fish glinted like needles, they rippled like fabric. A haze filled the water. Soon those who had lived were no longer recognizable.

While the latest sea burial was taking place in Tolan, another post-bellum engagement was taking place across the territory where the ancient city of Athens had once stood. Here the remnants of the human race were fighting against their own inventions. A group of refugees from the battle fled southwards. Day by day, eluding pursuit, they neared the peninsula over which Nefriki watched.

On the subject of love, or what passed for love in The Perfect Place. In no other aspect of life was the difference between brother and sister more marked. All men desired Antarida. They desired her youth and pallor; they desired the fragile beauty of her skull; above all, they desired her for the obscenity of what her hands and fingers did. From the highest to the lowest, all men and some women yearned — even more than for death — to be encircled by the embrace of Antarida.

Nor did Antarida deny her suitors. It could not be said that Antarida had passion. But it suited her to be rendered entirely naked, to be slobbered and pawed over, to be clutched by older men in the rictus of orgasm. She herself did not move during these encounters, but lay as still, as well mannered, as one of her corpses.

Her brother, from the small watchtower above their house, looked down through the skylight in the roof. He could see her spread-eagled in the posture of sea-buried corpses, while

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men had their way with her. In this sight Nefriki took a melancholy pleasure; for he knew — such were the mores of Tolan — that these couplings added greatly to the prestige of his sister.

Occasionally Antarida was visited by the man Nefriki feared most, Reeve Ikanu. This dark-visaged man was the reeve of the city to whom Nefriki was answerable. Ikanu ruled the frontier. Ikanu could dismiss Nefriki from his post or sentence him to death for the smallest infringement of the law.

Ikanu's face was heavy and pale with compressed cruelty, although his body was thin and dark as if stained. The skin of his hairless cranium was multitudinously veined, so that it seemed as if his brain were visible. When Ikanu lowed his stained body onto Nefriki's sister, his savage watchdog sat outside the house, close by the door, guarding his master. When the dog caught a glimpse of Nefriki on the watchtower, it would growl, "Guard yourself," in a voice as deep and threatening as its master's. The dog ate meat; its master subsisted on a diet of wine and gnats.

Sometimes Nefriki allowed his thoughts to turn to the past, and to Etsimita, the love of his early adolescence. Etsimita had been of a higher caste than he. Their love had been forbidden. Had it been known, both Nefriki and Etsimita would have suffered death. Perhaps this peril made their brief passion all the sweeter.

In those days Nefriki had been able to love. His soul had been like a country in a fairy tale, conquered by love, and he had wished only to be possessed by Etsimita and to possess her, soul to soul.

They could meet only at night. One night of unclouded stars, they had met by the seashore and walked along it barefoot, holding hands. They had been talking low and seriously on subjects lovers talk of — those conversations so intense that they can never be recaptured afterward, no matter how hard the bemused lover tries.

Etsimita had been overcome by happiness and by the beauty of the occasion. She hauled up her long skirt to the top of her delectable haunches and plunged into the breakers, which were made silver by the Milky Way that shone aslant them. As she went, she cried to Nefriki to join her.

He wished for nothing better. But hardly had he entered the foam when a black shape rose from the water before Etsimita and dragged her down below the waves. Uttering a cry, he dived to her rescue.

She came floating up in a pool of blood, and he dragged her ashore. Both her legs had been severed almost to the knee. The cuts were clean. It was no shark that had seized her but an antipersonnel war machine, drifting far off course, an accursed

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product of the ruined world.

Etsimita died before Nefriki could carry her home. His sister sealed up the wounded leg-stumps and went about her mortuary business with her deft hands, her diligent fingers, her probing thumb. Then, since she had transgressed inviolable rules of her society, the remains of Etsimita were consigned to the excreta beds. Something in Nefriki had passed from him at that time.

These memories returned to Nefriki as he sat on the watchtower, regarding the prostrate body of his sister below. The memories fled at the sound of a stone bouncing down the mountainside some distance away — a sound only his ear was acute enough to catch.

Immediately Nefriki was alert, again the guardian of the community. He slid to the ground, took his long bow and the quiver of arrows that leaned by the door, and moved into the concealment of the broom bushes. Climbing among boulders, he quickly reached the spine of the peninsula, where rock piled on rock like mating geckos.

Wedging himself between two boulders, Nefriki could see blue sea far below on either side, gleaming in the sunshine. Ahead of him was movement. Among the umbrella pines, a party of men was approaching. High overhead, Ikanu's trained birds of omen soared, screaming to the foe in their artificial voices, "Distance yourself, distance yourself!"

There were other guards Nefriki could summon. Attached to his quiver was a shrill reed that would call them. Such was Nefriki's confidence that no such thought entered his head. He was filled with excitement at the anticipation of killing.

Of recent years, mountain lions and wolves had been returning to the mountains of Greece. They moved no more silently than Nefriki amid his allotted territory.

As he worked his way forward, he saw the five men were approaching. Ahead went a scout, moving with caution — and more difficult to keep an eye on than the four who followed him. Of course, one was plainly the chief; he rode on a kind of legged machine that squeaked softly as it progressed. The other three men followed with the dogged and enduring manner of subordinates. It made good sense to kill the leader first.

The leader was a proud man. He looked about arrogantly, his bare chin jutting. He had already sighted the toylike Perfect Place. He wore a helmet with visor, perhaps to protect himself from harmful radiations that still invaded the air. Over one shoulder a carbine was slung.

Above the leader, above the pines, wheeled Ikanu's birds of omen, still calling, "Distance yourself, distance yourself!..."

Nefriki slid one of his powerful hands across a rock, flexed his mus-

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cles, dragged himself against the rock, waited motionless until the scout had passed within a few yards of him, and then fitted an arrow to his bow. He raised himself slightly and drew back the bow with all his strength.

The small party was passing behind a thicket of cactus. As they emerged, Nefriki let the arrow fly. It sped to its mark with a powerful, angry sound. It penetrated the thin metal plating the leader wore across his chest and buried itself in his rib cage.

The leader made no comment upon his dying. He was evidently a man of decision; on receiving the arrow, he fell without hesitation backwards from the machine. As his head struck ground, blood pumped from his mouth and ran into his helmet.

Nefriki released a second arrow and ran forward without waiting to see it strike its target. As he dodged behind boulders, he swung the bow over his shoulder and drew his short sword. He rushed out to confront two demoralized men; their companion lay on the ground beside the leader, an arrow through his chest; one of his legs was still kicking, scattering small stones.

"Distance yourself!" screamed the birds of omen.

One of the two survivors was too frightened to shoot. The other brought up a self-focus heat weapon and fired wildly. A pine tree burst into flame above Nefriki's head. Nefriki sliced off the man's right arm. The other man turned and fled.

Breathing deep, Nefriki picked up a heavy round stone, took aim, and flung it at the head and shoulders bobbing down the hillside. He heard the brutal sound of stone connecting with skull before dropping to the ground as bullets sang through the air in his direction. The scout was returning.

Since the scout kept up intermittent fire, he betrayed his position while Nefriki worked behind him. It was no great matter to attack silently from the rear, to bring the short sword into play, to thrust its already bloodied blade upward right under the scout's ribs. While the scout shuddered in the dust and died, Nefriki went back to finish the man whose hand he had severed. He smiled all the while.

Among the dead stood the legged machine, bearing a burden slung on its back. It spoke in a gentle voice as Nefriki approached.

"Master, I will serve you. I am made to serve. Do not destroy me as you have destroyed those humans. I can work for you all the days of your life."

Without replying, Nefriki went cautiously to inspect it. The machine's parts were painted a dull green. Its four legs were multi-jointed and ended above its body; it could adjust to function as a taller or a smaller animal. Set in its square head

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beside its eyes were the muzzles of two guns. They pointed at Nefriki, awaiting his reply.

He took an enormous sudden kick, catching the machine under its chin. For a moment he thought he had broken his leg or at least his toes, but his strength and his sandals saved him. As the pain left his limbs, he saw that he had jammed the machine's head back at an angle that rendered its guns useless.

He turned his attention to the burden on the machine's back. Strapped there, wrapped in film, unmoving, was what he thought was a beautiful dead girl. He took a step nearer. As Nefriki looked down at her, the girl opened her eyes and gazed up at him. He ceased smiling and tugged his golden beard instead.

Breaking the straps that bound her, he lifted the fragile burden from the machine, to set it rustling on its feet. He balanced her in an upright position, one arm encircling her waist. Then with another kick he sent the machine trotting downhill toward the distant sea.

The imprisoned girl's lips moved. "Spare me," she said. No mist from her breath obscured the wrappings over her face.

Shouts sounded near at hand. Other Tolanese guards were coming, called Nefriki by name. Nefriki did not reply. Half carrying, half dragging the film-wrapped girl, he made his way to a shallow cave he knew of, its entrance concealed by bushes. He climbed in and pulled her after him. They lay together until the hue and cry faded, and sunset melted in patches among the rocks outside their hiding place. All that while he gazed at her silvery face.

When everything was quiet, Nefriki began to unwrap the girl — gently at first and then furiously, as the film resisted his tugging. When she was free, she gave a sigh and stretched her arms above her head, so that her flimsy tunic rumpled up over her body. Her hair was dark and hung to her shoulders without a curl.

She was thin, even spindly. The joints of her arms clicked slightly as she raised them. Nefriki could feel in her the gentlest of vibrations, and knew that her heart was of plastic, not flesh. He lay against her, terrified. This was the enemy, forbidden in The Perfect Place. The inhuman. The inhuman and female incarnate.

His body was touching hers. The workings of the engines inside her gave her synthetic flesh warmth. He could easily kill her.

She said, "Thank you for saving me. You do not have to be frightened. I should not be able to resist you if you wished to demolish me. All men are my conquerors, that I know." Her voice was lightly accented with regret.

"The men I killed were your friends."

"The men you killed...." She let the phrase dangle, perhaps in con-

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tempt, then said after a pause, "I was only their *thing*. I told you, you do not have to be frightened."

"Frightened of you? How could I be frightened of you? You saw what I did to the men you were with."

When she said nothing, he declared, "I'm frightened of nothing." He raised himself on one elbow to look down at her face.

She did not reply.

Angrily, he said, "What are you, anyway? You're an artificial creation. You don't even understand what I say."

"Yes, I'm artificial. I'm an atrinal android, designed to appease man's need to touch. A plaything." Her tone made him feel naive.

It was his turn to say nothing. She said, "Relationships between men and women are so bad that men have had to invent something like me, to avoid their pain in true human relationships."

"Is it possible to have a — true relationship with you?"

With a hint of coquetry, the android said, "That is for you to say. It depends on your character."

"Come out into the open. I want to look at you. Don't try to run away." He made his voice rough, masculine.

She climbed out of the cave after him and stood relaxedly, her eyes turned to the sea murmuring far below, so that her perfectly formed, anonymous face took on a pensive expression.

Nefriki caught her wrist. "Take off your dress."

"You wish to see me naked? I am formed like a living woman. Of course I will do that for you, but first you must answer a few questions about yourself."

"What's that to you?"

"So that we can be close. Or do you fear that? What is your name?"

"I'm Nefriki, the guard of this place. You have seen what a good guard I am. I kill anyone who comes near Tolan. I keep Tolan safe. I am stronger and deadlier than anyone else in Tolan. I can have any woman I want. Every woman desires to lie with me."

The atrinal android said in a soft voice, "I also wish to lie with you, Nefriki.... But first tell me who you are."

"I told you. I'm the guard, the strongest man here. This is The Perfect Place. Everyone fears and respects me. Last year I killed a mountain lion with my bare hands."

She sat down so that her face was hardly to be seen in the velvet of early night.

"Anecdotes, boasts, Nefriki.... But what lies under them? Tell me who the real man is, and then we can make love."

He squatted beside her and gave a short, angry laugh. "Is it such a privilege, to make love to a machine? Pah, any woman in Tolan would throw herself at me and beg for my love.

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They never ask who I really am."

"Perhaps they dare not ask. Perhaps they dread to know.... Do you know that there are a few wise humans who believe that The Deterrence came about because the world's leaders suffered from men's common fear of women, and of themselves being women? They had to prove they were men even to the extreme of ruining the planet. And they rose to power over populations who felt as they did. Women know these things."

"What can women know that men don't?"

"They know that men desire their bodies but fear their minds."

"Rubbish. You're a demented machine."

She beckoned him nearer. "Before you discover how human I can be, Nefriki, tell me your deepest secrets, your deepest truths, tell me who your real self is.... I don't ask it to achieve power over you but to free you, to make you free."

He moved closer, took her in his arms, kissed her roughly on her lips.

"You see. I have no fear of you." He laughed. "Suppose you tell me your secrets, if you have any."

She put a finger to her lips. "I will tell you my deepest secret. It is so profound that you will think it trivial. I am only a mirror. I can only mirror the men in my life. So was I designed, as a machine; but I can tell you this — I have found that many human women are also mirrors. They have turned themselves into mirrors. Simply through fear."

The conversation was not to his taste. He did not understand her. Besides, he felt hungry.

He jumped to his feet, called to the android woman to follow him, and headed down almost invisible trails to his house.

Antarida was not in. She had left the house empty, the door open. No doubt at this time of night she would be lying on a bed in one of the small palaces of Tolan, prostrate beneath some gallant necrophile.

He lit a lantern and brought forth bread, cheese, and the cloudy wine of Tolan. He offered them to the creature who stood just inside the door, watching him with her narrow eyes.

"I do not eat," she said, regarding him steadily.

"Sit down while I eat. You worry me."

She came to the table with a wanton step. She was designed to please, for all her riddles; he saw that. He wondered how best to kill her.

"What sort of secrets did you expect me to tell you? I've no secrets."

She said, softly, "You are so vulnerable, Nefriki. I hear the way your voice dies at the end of a sentence. I love the sound of it."

"You'll never capture my heart by such talk." He spoke through a mouthful of bread.

"It's not your heart I want but

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your soul. You brought me to your house to show me one of your secrets."

"I brought you here because I wanted to eat. It's my house, you silly hen, that's all. I could break your plastic neck."

She shook her head sadly.

She rested her hands together on the table and said, "No, you brought me here to show me that you live with a woman. Her scent is about the room. But you never make love to her. Why do you live with a woman to whom you never make love?"

He struck the table with his fist.

"Because she is my sister. You expect me to make love to my sister? Whatever happens in the ruined world, here we have the death penalty for such obscenity."

"Otherwise...." she said, and let the word hang in the air like the dark trail that rose upward from the wick of the lamp.

He lowered his head and ate without looking at her, pressing the food into his mouth, scowling.

At last he rose, still chewing the last crust of bread.

"The night is fine. We will go and swim. Then we'll see what happens. Can you swim or do you sink?"

"I swim, Nefriki, thank you. I can do most of the things men wish me to do, like other women."

He led the way down the hillside. Occasionally he looked back over his shoulder to see that the android woman still followed him. She appeared all obedience, but he could not trust her.

It was his duty to kill her. If Reeve Ikanu discovered that he had spared an invader from the ruined world, Nefriki's life would be forfeit. Inside him he felt a reluctance to do the deed himself; this creature was a powerful witch, with an understanding of men Nefriki regarded as almost uncanny. There was another way to dispose of her.

As they climbed down to the shore, they had to pass by the slope-shouldered villa that was the residence of Ikanu. The villa was composed of small towers, featureless except for small square windows here and there, designed to keep out sunlight. The building resembled a tropical ants' nest. As man and android woman passed by its slanting sides, they saw a light in one of the small windows. As they passed by the front door, soft-footed, the watchdog sitting at the step called in its deep growl, "Guard yourself."

But for once Nefriki was too intent on his purpose to feel fear of the reeve. He ran down onto the sand, and the girl followed.

The night was lighter on the beach. The star blaze overhead reflected on the waves, and there was a dazzle of luminescence in the warm water just offshore. Fireflies darted along the beach like miniature ball lightning.

He kicked off his sandals, and then,

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after only a moment's hesitation, pulled off his clothes. Meekly, the android woman also undressed. She stood before him without defenses, her functionless breasts close to his chest. He caught the thickness in his own voice as he said, "You go in the water first. I'll follow."

It was a long time ago that his love Etsimita had ventured into this same water to her death. Nefriki had never dared to plunge into the tempting waves since. He stood on the shore, fists on hips, watching as the android girl obeyed and waded deeper.

"Stop!" He could bear it no longer. The water splashed against her meek shoulder blades. She turned back to look at him when he shouted. Nefriki plunged out to her, calling incoherently.

He grasped her arm and ran back with her to the shore, dragging her against the undertow. "It's dangerous," he said. "Dangerous. Machines in the water...."

They flung themselves onto the sand. He took hold of her and began to kiss her passionately.

"You must forgive me, you must forgive me."

She said, "Was it courage that made you run in after me?"

"No, no." He was burying his face in her damp synthetic hair. "It was fear. I couldn't lose you. You offered me something...."

She was breathing more deeply, stirring in his embrace. "No, leave me alone. You wanted to kill me. To dispose of me."

She tried feebly to break from his grasp, but was unable to.

Nefriki thrust his face into hers until his lips were almost touching her lips. His face was distorted. She felt his damp beard against her throat. "Listen, woman, you gave me the chance to speak the truth about myself. I couldn't take it — so covered is my life in lies. You're right, all men are liars. Well, now I've caught you again. I've got you and I will tell you the truth, and you will listen."

She turned her face away. "Death excites you so much, doesn't it? You're preparing to lie again."

"I will tell you the truth only if you will believe it, if you will keep still, if you will accept what I say."

"There can be no such contract," she said. "You may tell me what you claim is your truth — then I will tell you if it is credible. The more insane you think it, the more likely it is to agree with horrible human normality. Do you understand that, Nefriki, you weakling, you fool? Laid open, humanity can only squeal out madness and terror — the madness of being born, the terror of dying, of confronting death.

"And for men there is something more: the dread of the female.... Every man is infiltrated by that dread, although he never escapes sharing all his chromosomes but one in common with womankind. Western man

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I'm talking about — the sort of man who unleashed The Deterrence on the whole world. Now — speak, Nefriki, if you must, knowing that I will believe you only if you reveal yourself as unutterably vile."

She had pulled herself free during this speech and knelt above him, as he had earlier knelt above her. He clutched her, his arms about her waist, and spoke in a low, choking voice.

"Very well, then. Vileness, yes, vileness. I am utterly destroyed by Tolan, by its mores, its society.... There's no one I love. Even my sister I hate....

"And I suppose that I dream of defiling her when she is dead....

"Yes I am a man. Toward every approach I must be tough. If the waves devour my sweetheart, I must not weep. I must be tough — to myself as well as to women. I poison myself thereby. Women. Yes. I hate them, their weakness.... Their strength even more...."

The android woman made to speak, but he silenced her, sinking lower, his lips against her thighs.

"There's no escape for me. Besides, to escape would be a womanly act. I'm a guard, a man among men, all male. Of course I hate women — yes, fear them...."

"Why fear them?" she asked.

"Years have gone by.... I touch nobody.... Love means weakness, surrender. A true man like me must be all hard. Sword in hand, no feeling. If you want me to say it so much, then I'll say it to you because you're only an android. I hate and envy women. There!"

As she looked down at him, her face was calm as usual. She opened her mouth, hesitated, and then said, "It's on that hatred, that ingrained sexual hatred, the world wrecked itself. The madness of the male, deterring real feeling, leads to The Deterrence. And the fears of women make them turn themselves into mirrors."

Nefriki was not listening. He said, "How can I escape my prison? I hate myself, I long — I long to be a woman. Yes, there, woman, there's my damned soul you asked for! Have it, take it for the little it's worth."

Nefriki burst into furious tears, burying his face in his muscular forearms and his elbows in the sand.

She rose and stood above him, like a statue in her nakedness. It was darker now. The luminescence had disappeared from the sea, the fireflies had gone.

"All this is more of your posturing, Nefriki. It's not your soul you're offering, it's a posture, nothing more. You're diseased, you can't speak truth — you wouldn't know truth if you saw it. I recognize what you say as a kind of truth, but mainly it is just your posture. No one confesses except to gain pity or admiration."

"You're being cruel," he said into his arms.

"I told you I am only a mirror. A

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mirror is all you require for your narcissism, not a living woman. That's why men invented my kind. You give me nothing. You never even asked my name."

She began to walk away down the beach, away from Nefriki, away from Tolan, The Perfect Place.

He shouted after her. "You demanded my soul, you damned bitch, and I gave it to you. Give me something in return."

Light swept across the sand, bright enough for Nefriki to see that the android woman had paused. He turned to see where the light came from.

The cruel reeve, Ikanu, had thrown open the front door of his house and was marching forward, sword in hand. Beside him was his faithful dog, shouting "Guard yourself" in its hoarse voice. A woman stood in Ikanu's doorway, holding a torch above her head. Nefriki saw that it was his sister, Antarida. So she wished to be witness at his death.

For a moment Nefriki stood undecided, attention caught among sister, reeve, and android woman.

The dog advanced, croaking its cry in its artificial voice, "Guard yourself." After it came Ikanu, now raising his sword threateningly. He wore a robe that trailed to the sand and a flowing wig to cover the baldness of his head; the wig flapped as he trudged toward Nefriki.

An unanticipated noise broke from Nefriki's mouth. He was laughing involuntarily. The figure of Ikanu, half-man, half-woman, suddenly embodied all the theatrical insanity of Tolan: Ikanu's melodrama, Antarida's necrophilia, the destructive life-style into which isolation had forced the beleaguered city.

In the middle of his laughter, Nefriki saw how he himself was living out a sham. He could give no coherent account of himself even to the android woman — there was no valid context from which to deliver it. His emotional life had frozen. He laughed to think he could have acted out a role without knowing it.

The laughter began high and fell to a low grating sound, much like the artificial voice of the dog.

On Reeve Ikanu the laughter had an extraordinary effect. The reeve dropped his sword to stand in puzzlement, thin arms outstretched. Slowly, his sandaled feet lost their purchase on the shifting sand. Slowly, he lost his balance and fell backward. His dog rushed to him and began licking his face. "Guard yourself, guard yourself...."

Nefriki turned. The dim light from Ikanu's doorway, where Antarida still stood transfixed, lit the retreating back of the android woman. It looked as if the darkness would swallow her at any moment.

He called to her and started running along the beach. "I want to know your name! I want to give you something real...."

Without turning back, without

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ceasing to stride along the beach, she said, "What have you got that's real?" Her voice was almost drowned by the sound of the surf.

As he ran, Nefriki shouted, "My soul! Isn't that what you wanted? You haven't got one. Help me find mine and we might manage things better between us. Where are you going?"

She made no answer. In desperation, he called again. "Why should I want to come with you?"

This time she stopped and half turned to deliver her response.

"The ruined world may resemble hell, but perhaps hell is where mankind belongs, not in perfect places. At least hell does not dissemble. You have vomited up some of your lies, Nefriki. If you dare to come with me, you may someday find your system cleansed entirely."

"I hate you," he said.

And then he took hold of her hand.

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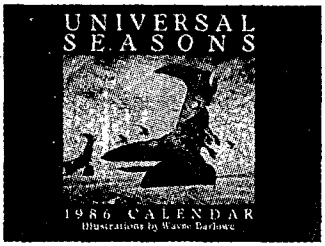

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This compelling tale is the longest and the best of several Irish fantasies Cooper McLaughlin has contributed to F&SF since 1982. It concerns an Irish-American historian named Dan Maguire, who comes to County Galway in search of a quiet place to write, only to confront a strange and disquieting series of events. . .

The Black and Tan Man

BY

COOPER MCLAUGHLIN

It was fate, or synchronicity, or something for which I have no name, that brought me to Letterkilly in County Galway. It was not an accident, of that I'm sure.

I had spent three months in London doing research at the National Army Museum, struggling through King James' *Irish Army List* and tracking down the missing hand-colored maps and illustrations to Walton's *History of the British Army.*

I was working on a monograph, "Logistical Problems in the Irish Campaign of 1690." Not likely to become an alternate selection for the Book-of-the-Month-Club, but enough to justify my sabbatical from the university, and to show that I was a "productive member of the academic community."

I had needed to get away from the campus. My lectures were stale and I was recovering from the effects of a three-year love affair with a woman physicist who found charmed quarks more charming than me.

In London I found a small bed-sitter off Harrow Road and commuted to the National Army Museum by moped. When not at the museum, I stayed to myself, avoiding social contacts. I ate fish-and-chips, drank bottled Guinness, and filled spiral-bound books with notes. By September I was restless. I'd done enough research, and I needed to start writing.

It was a rainy Tuesday morning. I put on water for coffee and picked up the paper sack full of greasy fish-and-chip wrappers, cigarette butts, and empty steak-and-kidney-pie tins. I went outside and down the steps to what I had learned to call the "dust-bins."

The red stone steps were slippery

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with misty rain. As I dumped the bag into the bin, I saw an orange-covered book, like a small telephone directory, leaning against the wall. I picked it up. It was damp but in good shape. "Baylor's Self-Catering Cottages," it read. I stuck it under my arm and looked at my battered Puch rent-a-moped chained to the cast-iron railing. The cracked leather seat was wet, and water dripped from the faded red "L" plate.

To hell with it. I didn't need to go back to the army museum, and the prospect of running the Marble Arch Grand Prix on the slick streets made me shudder.

Back in my room, I made Nescafe, half-and-half with gold top cream and Grand Marnier, then lit a cigarette and looked at the Baylor book, which I'd thrown on a table. I flipped it open. I knew what "self-catering" meant. Places for rent, with cooking facilities. Vacation residences. There were photos of forty-room castles, modern beach bungalows, villas, country cottages, caravans ... all for rent, in England, Scotland, Wales ... and Ireland.

I turned to the section on Ireland. It had been my plan to go there for a week or two when I'd finished writing. The Baylor book gave me an idea. Going now might be a perfect solution. I could rent an isolated cottage in the countryside and write my monograph there. In the upper left corner of the page, I saw a blurred photo of a typical, whitewashed cabin set against a grove of trees. Something about the place struck me.

COUNTY GALWAY. *Blackrock Cottage. On Lough Ross. 12 miles to Letterkilly. Convenient shops. 2 bdrm. Sleeps 4+.* Mod. Ktchn, calor, refr. Fishing, swimming, hiking. 6 mi. to ocean beach. Available all year. Off-season rates....

In Letterkilly. I recognized the name. Letterkilly.... My grandfather, Thomas Maguire, had come from there. With a pregnant wife and a child in arms, he'd sailed twenty days in steerage to New York. There were hints that he'd fled because of some political trouble, but he never talked about it.

He was a tough old man, thirty years with the San Francisco Fire Department, who died of a heart attack after pulling three people from a burning building. He chewed tobacco, called me "Tiggles," and told me stories with the flair of an old-country *shenachie.* As a small boy, I saw him as a god in a blue uniform. I was always delighted when people pointed out our resemblance. "The very spit of his grandfather...." an elderly neighbor once said. I nearly collapsed with joy. I had no doubt I'd grow up to be a fireman.

Like many Irish-Americans, my family had lost touch with the relatives who stayed behind, but I did remember the name Letterkilly. I

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emptied the coins from a cracked cup and went out to call Baylor's.

Following instructions from the rental office, I drove my rented Mini from Shannon Airport to the crossroads village of Letterkilly. At one end of High Street was a small parish church; at the other, a long gray stucco building, a combination pub, grocery store, post office, and telephone exchange. A faded gilt sign over the entrance read "Cathal Talbot & Sons — Fine Wines and Liquors." I parked the Mini in front of a bright yellow-and-green telephone box, wondering what kind of "Fine Wines" might be found in the wilds of County Galway.

A short man with thin red hair and watery blue eyes stood in the doorway, blocking the entrance. As I approached, he wiped his hands on the frayed towel that hung from his belt.

"Mr. Maguire, is it?"

"I am," I replied. He offered neither hand nor name, and I assumed he was one of the Talbots.

"You're for Blackrock, then." He pulled a ring of old-fashioned brass keys from his pocket. "I've had the letter from the rental office, and the provisions you were wanting have been laid on."

I stood there, my hand extended to shake his. He clapped the keys in my palm.

"There you are, Mr. Maguire."

I stepped back, holding the keys as if I were "it" in some game of tag. This was not the way such matters were conducted in Ireland, certainly not with a pubkeeper. In the ordinary way, we would have had a few drinks and discussed the weather. Did I have relatives here? Was I married? Being from America, might I not know his cousin Frank in Cleveland, Ohio?

There was none of that. Perhaps the man was shy, unaccustomed to tourists. Letterkilly, after all, was not a place that the world stood in line to visit. I put the keys in my coat pocket. Give the man a chance.

"Beautiful country here. My grandfather came from this very place." I smiled. A conversation opener, good for at least an hour of bloodlines and genealogical anecdotes. No response.

I tried again. "Are there any Maguires around here?"

Talbot shook his head. "Maguires? Ah. No Maguires live hereabouts...."

A wrinkled old man in a patched coat and a black cloth cap pushed his way out of the pub. He leaned against the door and looked at us with unfocused eyes. "Maguires, is it? What's with the Maguires, now?"

The pubkeeper steadied the old man against the door, holding him upright. "Easy, Willy boy. This is Mr. Maguire, from America." He nodded in my direction. "Inquiring he is, after his relatives. I've told him there are no Maguires in this parish."

The old man paused and straight-

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ened. "Right you are, Eddie," he said with solemn dignity. "Malones and Mahans ... but never a Maguire. Perhaps the man is mistaken of the name ...." He looked at me, his head bobbing on his neck.

Talbot took him by the elbow. "Off you go now, Willy. Get yourself home, the woman will nail your head to the door when she catches a breath of you."

"That she will...." the old man mumbled, and started down the road like a clockwork soldier.

Talbot turned to me. "You'll be wanting to settle in, Mr. Maguire. If you follow the road round the lake for a bit, you'll see a large black rock on your right, take the turn after and you'll come to Blackrock Cottage, sure you can't miss it."

I had enough experience of traveling in Ireland to know that "you can't miss it" translates as "you *can* miss it, and probably will." From the rental office's map, I knew that the turnoff was at least twelve miles from where I stood. It was only three o'clock. If I couldn't find Blackrock, I'd come back to the pub and insist on help. Friendly or not, Talbot was paid to act as agent for the place.

"Thanks very much," I said, controlling my irritation.

"Ah. Mr. Maguire ... the provisions. If you'd care to pay for them now. Then there's five pounds a week for the Callahan woman who cleans and looks after the place."

"I don't need a cleaning woman. I can take care of that myself."

"I'm sure you can. But it's the ... custom here." He gave me a faint smile. "Perhaps you'd rather deal with her yourself."

"How much for the groceries and stuff?"

Talbot looked at the sky. "Sixty pounds, even."

Sixty pounds! I fingered the keys in my pocket. I was being had, like ... well, like some goddamn *foreigner*.

"Do you have the bill?"

Talbot shuffled his feet. "The bill. Ah. The bill, now."

"I'll be back tomorrow, Mr. *Talbot*.... I'll check at the cottage against what I ordered." I turned on my heel and walked to the car.

Lough Ross is long and narrow. Fed by the rocky watershed of the Maumturk Mountains, it empties through a sluggish, reed-choked mouth, into the gray swells of the Atlantic.

I took the lake road, pushing the Mini as fast as it would go, wishing it were a Porsche 944. No worries about other cars. In this desolate part of the country, three vehicles in a fifty-mile stretch would be a traffic jam.

To my left the afternoon sun glinted off patches of brackish water, miles of peat bogs with no sign of houses or people, only the hulking, shadowy hills, and at intervals along the roadside, six-foot-high piles of cut and stacked turf.

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Ahead, the bog gave way to the expanse of the lake. The wind came up, bending the reeds near the bank, and whitecaps whipped across the surface. I watched the odometer. At ten miles I slowed down, braking at every gulley and sheep path, straining to catch a glimpse of the black rock. The road curved around a small peninsula, I saw a weathered wooden dock. Atop the dock were what appeared to be primordial black animals with rocks on their backs. They were *curach,* small boats of tarred canvas, stretched over a light wicker frame.

I got out and eased my legs. The sun was behind the clouds, and thunderheads were building over the mountains. There was no sound but the metallic crackle of the cooling engine and the rising wind in the reeds. I felt uneasy, as if I were being watched from the hills, yet nothing moved. The cold breeze off the lake gave me a sudden chill, and I stepped into the lee of the car and lit a cigarette.

Gusting wind pushed the water into choppy waves, and a dense, cloudlike spray rolled across its surface. Once before I had seen this happen. Two years ago, while fishing on Lough Ree with an old professor from Trinity College.

"The boys are coming home," he said.

"What boys are that?"

He had pointed with the stem of his pipe to the cloud of spray. "Those are the souls of young men who've died fighting foreign wars.... Coming home to rest." He smiled. "Or so it is said."

High overhead a black V of geese wheeled against the clouds. I got into the car and started the engine.

Past the dock the road made a sharp S turn. Coming out of the last bend onto the straight, I saw a hooded green and purple figure fifty yards ahead. It was a woman in a cloak. As I approached, the woman stepped into the road and swept back her hood. I stood on the brakes and fishtailed to a stop.

A cascade of night-black hair fell from the hood, a silk cloud blown by the wind. As she moved toward the car, the cape billowed open, showing a slim figure in an old-fashioned, wide-skirted green dress, which hung almost to the ground. Jet buttons fastened the dress from neck to waist, and she wore dark green earrings of polished Connemara stone.

I rolled down the window. She came toward me, moving lightly, the long dress and the cloak giving the impression that she floated over the road.

"Good day, miss. Could you tell me...."

She rested her hand on the door and bent forward.

"Mr. Maguire?" She gave me a

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smile as wide as the Shannon in flood.

"Uh. Yes ... I'm Dan Maguire." For a moment I had almost forgotten my name.

"That's good. I'm Mary Callahan."

The Callahan woman? Surely this couldn't be the cleaning woman Talbot had mentioned.

"I telephoned Eddie Talbot, and he said you were on your way, so I came down to the road to be sure you didn't get yourself lost."

"Talbot told me to turn when I saw the black rock."

I opened the passenger door as she came around. She slid into the seat, wrapping the cloak around her.

"Did he? He's a helpful soul." She paused. "You couldn't see the rock from the road unless you were riding an elephant. It's luck the telephone was working, it's the first time in weeks. Go ten yards on and turn."

I laughed. "Talbot seems to have taken an instant dislike to me."

Mary Callahan said nothing. She sat upright in the seat, looking straight ahead. Her skin was pale and flawless, with a translucent quality that seemed to absorb the light.

We bounded over a rutted, washed-out path. I dropped to low gear as the Mini struggled up the hill. We topped the rise to a small plateau. In the center rose a jagged black monolith. One side of the rock had been split away by centuries of erosion, leaving a long, sheltered niche, like a polished table.

Beyond the rock I could see the length of the lake, and in the far distance, the slate-gray rollers of the Atlantic.

"Lovely view, isn't it?" She nodded her head toward the rock. "The cottage takes its name from that...."

I looked again at the huge stone. Near the center of the niche were two spots of bright color, yellow and white. "What's that?" I pointed. "Looks like flowers."

"They are. This was a 'Mass rock' in the old days when we were forbidden the use of our churches."

"Ah. Yes. The Penal Laws," I said. "Fifty pounds for the head of a wolf or the head of a priest."

She looked at me. "You seem to know a bit of our history, Mr. Maguire."

"I should." I laughed. "I'm a professional historian. That's why I came here, I was looking for a quiet place to write about some aspects of the Jacobite campaign of 1690."

"Historian, are you?" She turned to face me. "I was reading Irish literature and history at UCD before...." She let the sentence hang.

"Before what?"

"Before I came here ... to take care of my grandmother." She made a sweeping gesture. "This was all Callahan land once — *O'Callahan,* as my grandmother would insist — all the land as far as your eye can see, and Blackrock Cottage as well. That's why I act as caretaker here, Granny has a

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great attachment for the place." She turned her head and stared out the passenger window.

"And the Mass rock, is it still in use?"

"It's not. Not for Masses...." Her voice was low. "The grandmother puts the flowers there, she's ... very sentimental."

Up the hill to my right, I could see a stand of trees. For a moment the sun broke through the clouds and I saw a flash of metal. A man was standing just inside the tree line. I could see him from the waist up. He was wearing some kind of uniform. The sun glinted on metal. A man with a rifle, standing in the tree line.

"Who's that, up there?"

Mary turned quickly. "Where?"

"Up there, by the trees." I pointed. The man was gone. "Looked like a man in uniform. With a rifle...."

"There's no one hereabouts." She gave me a strange look.

"Maybe a hunter."

"There's nothing here to hunt. A trick of the light, Mr. Maguire...." Her voice was flat.

I could feel the sweat on my forehead. I tightened my hands on the wheel. Christ! This couldn't be happening to me, not after so many years. A rifleman in the tree line. A trick of the light. It had to be a trick of the light.

I felt Mary Callahan's hand on my shoulder. "You've come a long road, Mr. Maguire. It's time to get you settled." She pointed. "Straight up that *boreen* to the cottage, and we'll pray this sewing machine of yours will make the hill."

She was right. I had come a long road.

Blackrock was a "cabin" in the old Irish usage. Thatched roof, weighted with roped stones against the Atlantic storms, built on the traditional plan, a room "above" and a room "below," around the central kitchen. I followed Mary inside. The beamed ceiling was low and smoke-blackened, and a turf fire blazed in a hearth big enough to roast a sheep. The only modern touches were a calor-gas stove and refrigerator in one corner, a pair of electric lamps at either end of a long sofa, and an ancient crank telephone on the wall by the door.

Mary lit an oil lamp and put it on the scrubbed oak table. "That's better than the electric. You never know, in this part of the world, when the electricity will go out."

"I'll get my bags from the car."

"Sit you down, Mr. Maguire. You're pale as whey. I'll give you something to warm your blood."

I sank into the worn armchair by the fire. I was tired. I could feel the tenseness in my neck and shoulders, and my face was hot.

The aroma of fresh-baked bread filled the room. Mary Callahan gave a turn to the wheel-bellows by the fire,

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then bent and lifted a round, golden loaf from the ornate, wrought-iron breadstick on the hearth. "We'll let this cool, now...."

I leaned back in the chair, my eyes were heavy.

"Here you are." I felt her hand on my shoulder. She gave me a glass of hot water and whiskey. "I'll have your dinner in a bit."

"That's not necessary, I...."

"You can't eat alone, your first night in a new house. Bad luck, that is." She smiled. "Besides, I've got it all done, haven't I?"

"Yes, you have." I laughed and took a sip of the hot whiskey. "I feel like a king," I said, watching her move across the room with the graceful economy of a dancer.

She looked at me over her shoulderr as she swung a heavy iron pot on the fireplace crane. "Aren't we all? ... We Irish. Descendants of kings and queens. Or so we tell the world."

She was right. My blood was warmed. Connamara lamb, moist and pink, that fell from the bone; potatoes in fresh churned butter; tiny glazed carrots that would make a French *chef de cuisine* blush with envy; warm soda bread; and pints of cool stout. And the company. For the first time in years, I felt I was not running second best to a linear accelerator.

I eased back in my chair. "If that's a sample of Talbot's 'provisions,' it's well worth the sixty pounds...."

Mary flushed. "There's nothing we've had from Talbot this day, except the whiskey and stout. The rest is my own, to make you welcome. Did you say *sixty pounds*, Mr. Maguire?"

"Dan. Please. That's what he said."

She slapped a hand on the table. "Well, Dan boy. We'll see about that. The brigand! He'd do no better standing in the road with a pistol in his hand." Her dark blue eyes glinted in the lamplight. "You're not to give him a pence until I say so, Dan."

She stood up and looked at her watch. "I must be off, I've Granny to look to."

"May I drive you?"

"It's only five minutes up the borreen. If you stand on your toes, you can see the place from here." She crossed the room and took her cloak from the peg. "I've made up the room for you. The eastern side, it takes more of the sun and less of the wind, and the bath's adjacent."

"Thanks very much, Miss Callahan."

She held out her hand. It was warm and smooth. "Mary, it is...."

"Mary, then." I reluctantly let her hand go.

"I'll be by in the morning and see to your tea, and show you how the electric pump works. There's water enough for now."

Through the window I watched her move up the path, the purple of her cloak intensified by the darkening skies.

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I unpacked my bag in the bedroom. The bed was large and covered with a heavy feather bolster. A night storage heater in the corner kept the room warm and dry.

Picking up my battered Smith-Corona portable and the carryall containing my notes and books, I went across to the west room, the room "above." The door was stuck, and I pushed against it with my shoulder. It opened suddenly. A cold chill struck me, and I shivered. In the gloom I could see a closed settlebed against one wall and a wooden wardrobe at the other. The room was damp, and there were faint traces of mold on the walls.

Under the casement window was a plain wooden table and two chairs. I put my gear on the table and pushed the window. It was warped in the frame. Tomorrow I'd try to get it open and air the place out. From the window I could see the dark outline of the Mass rock, and beyond that the lake. It would be a good place to write.

I went back to the kitchen and poured myself another inch of whiskey. Sitting in front of the hearth, I leaned back and stared into the flickering red ash of the fire.

The man I'd seen. The rifleman. Had I really seen him? I took a drink. The man in the tree line. The images were still clear and sharp.

Long-range Reconnaissance Patrol. In the shadow of Nui Ba Den ... the Black Virgin Mountain. The sky was gray and darkening fast. A last-light extraction.

Out. Fifteen minutes and we'd be out. On the way, safe. I had a bad feeling. They were coming after us. Nothing clear, just a hunch. There were five of us in a semicircle, facing the LZ, Sergeant Coulter back guarding the rear.

The CAR-15 felt slick in my hands. I turned on my side, keeping an eye on the bush as I took a drink from the collapsible canteen. The water was warm and metallic in my mouth. I could feel the wet, boggy ground under my belly. On my right, Tom Gurski rolled and held out the handset of the support radio.

"Darkhorse 3 ... on the way. ETA two minutes...."

I glanced up. Somewhere overhead the Hunter-Killer teams were circling. I keyed the handset.

"Darkhorse 3, this is Snooper 6 ... Throwing smoke...." I turned to Gurski. "Pop yellow, Tom."

The bright smoke drifted over the LZ. *Come on, come on....* I watched the skies. This didn't *feel* right. Number ten pucker ... get out!

The headset crackled in my ear. "Snooper 6 ... Darkhorse 3. Identify yellow." The extraction slick popped over the trees. The Huey banked hard to the right, flared, and touched down. The door gunner opened up with his M-60, hosing down the bush opposite.

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I jumped up. "Go!" Gurski and the others sprinted for the slick, and I turned to cover Coulter as he broke from the bush.

I ran for the slick. I could see Gurski pulling Coulter through the door. Then it happened. AK and RPD fire from the tree line. My hunch was right. They were waiting for us.

Tracers arced across the LZ. I almost made it. In the middle of the LZ, the command-detonated mine went off.

I was in the air ... flying ... arms outstretched ... a bird. Slowly flying, the matted green of the LZ beneath me. Weapon gone. The ruck ripped from my back. I could fly forever ... up, up and away in my beautiful balloon ... flying back to the world.

The ground smashed into my chest. A sharp pain shot up my leg, firing off rockets in my head. I lay still. From the waist down I could feel nothing. Jesus Christ! My spine! My spine had been hit. I was paralyzed.

I raised up on one elbow. To my left I could see the slick on its side, the twisted rotor blades black against the sky, Snooper team scrambling out, returning fire.

Then I saw him. A rifleman. He stepped from the tree line, ten yards to my front. An NVA. Blood ran from a wound in his chest. He looked down at me and grinned, then raised his AK-47 and aimed it at my head.

The LOACH came in low and hot, skids clipping leaves from the canopy. *Darkhorse 16* ... the Hunter ... minigun burning two thousand rounds per minute. Like a red bolt of lightning, the tracers took the NVA full in the chest. I buried my face in the dirt.

When I looked up, the NVA was gone. His shattered weapon lay on the ground. Behind it, lined up neatly, as if laid out for inspection, were his Ho Chi Minh sandals.

I awoke to find Doc Martin grinning down at me. His coal-black face was sweat-streaked.

"Doc ... my back...."

"Ain't nothing wrong with that back, Lieutenant. You ain't even got any holes in your hide. Lookit this...."

He held up the shredded remnants of my ruck. "You got the fuckin' Airborne luck, my man. Got yourself a million-dollar broken laig!" He hit me with the needle. As the lights went out, I heard the magic words.

"Dust-off comin'...."

I got up and threw more turf on the fire. I refilled my glass and sat back in the chair. It had been a long time ago, but the memories of that time were there, buried and controlled. For the first few months after my discharge, I was jumpy, sensitive to loud noises; there were nightmares, then they faded. I had a life to get on with. Those years, those memories I pushed into the background.

Now I had seen a rifleman in the tree line. Was he real? Perhaps I was hallucinating. "Delayed stress syndrome" or whatever the psychologists

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called it. Cracking up. Affter all these years. It happened to some, that I knew.

I got up and "smored" the fire, banking the turf evenly. I was tired, and a little drunk. I didn't *think* I was going crazy, but then, does a crazy know he's crazy?

A trick of the light, Mary had said. A trick of the light. I went to bed.

Something woke me. For a moment I didn't know where I was. The room was black. The old house stretched its bones in the cold night. Wind whispered through the thatch. I reached for my watch and pressed the button: 3:22 A.M.

I heard voices. A man's voice, then another voice, lower, urgent. I slipped from the bed and went to the door. The floor was icy under my feet. In the kitchen the banked fire gave off a flickering glow. I listened. A woman's voice, crying, pleading. A knocking sound from the room opposite. The voices stopped.

I moved quickly across the floor and shoved the door open. The full moon shone through the open casement windows, which banged against the outer walls. The cold was intense, and I realized I was naked. There was a faint scent of jasmine in the air. I hurried to close the windows. They must have come loose when I pushed against them.

As I reached to pull the windows shut, I saw him. Clear in the moonlight, a tall, shadowy figure moving toward the Mass rock. The man in uniform, this time without his rifle. This was no hallucination of a long-dead NVA soldier. No NVA ever wore boots, breeches, and a Sam Browne belt. I was not crazy. As I watched, the man disappeared behind the rock. There was no sign of the woman whose voice I had heard.

I woke in the morning to the smell of bacon and coffee. I put my head out the bedroom door to find Mary working in the kitchen. The table was set, and there was a spray of yellow flowers in a vase on the table.

"Breakfast is almost ready," she said. "How will you have your eggs?"

"You're an angel of mercy," I said. "Give me ten minutes to shower."

"You'll have them scrambled, then. Fried, they'll have edges like Brussels lace."

An hour later I tilted back my chair and lit a cigarette. Mary poured thick cream into her coffee.

"Ah. That was marvelous. And hot toast! I haven't had hot toast since I left California."

Mary smiled. "I'd heard Americans were queer for hot toast. God intended it to be cold and covered with congealed grease, as any decent Irishman knows. Now, how did you sleep, Daniel?"

I hesitated. The morning sun lit her face, and I could count her eyelashes. Would the count be odd or

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even? She loves me, she loves me not....

I shook my head. "I slept well, but I ... I thought I heard a noise ... voices...."

Her body tightened. "Voices? What voices would that be?"

I couldn't tell her what I'd seen. Perhaps it was true. I was losing it. Voices and visions.... "I thought I heard ... the man ... the man I saw in the trees."

She rose from her chair. "There's no one else here, only the two of us and Granny."

"I saw...."

"Will you have more coffee?" She went to the calor stove and picked up the pot. Her back was stiff.

Back off! Back off! an inner voice warned. Don't give her the impression you're a psychotic nut.

She poured coffee for us. "What will you do today?"

"I should get started writing, but I think I'd like to take a walk and see the countryside."

She brightened. "Good. I've got to go to Clifden this morning." She frowned. "Then there's the matter of Eddie and his famous sixty pounds. We'll soon sort that out." She paused. "I'll be back by one o'clock. Shall we take a picnic by the lake? The other side is wild and beautiful...."

If she had offered to show me the Styx in a glass-bottomed boat, I'd have said yes.

• • •

I was waiting on the dock when Mary arrived in a dented old MG sedan. She unloaded a wicker picnic basket and a heavy blanket.

"We'll take one of the *curach,*" she said.

I was amazed by the lightness of the boat as we lowered it into the water. "I'll do the rowing," she said. "This is a sly bit of a boat; if you haven't the way of it, you go in circles."

I eased myself into the *curach*, shoving the basket and blanket under the thwart. The boat rode high in the water, skittering like a nervous horse. The oars were strangely shaped, with a hole bored in the shaft of each one. Mary fitted them over wooden pegs fixed to the gunwales.

The lake was smooth, and with the gentle wind behind us, the *curach* seemed to glide over the water. Mary rowed with an easy, supple movement. Dressed in jeans and a heavy wool sweater, her Wellington boots braced against the *curach*'s ribs, her long hair drifting in the wind, I caught the sense of anima power, that here was a descendant of the fabled queens of Ireland, the armed and armored women who rode at the head of their troops, daughters of The Dark Rosaleen.

She caught my eye and blushed. "If you've the strength to move your eyes, Dan, there's more to see than you're looking at."

"I like what I see."

"Do you, now? That's what comes

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of an idle mind." She laughed and bent her back to the oars.

We sat on a high rock overlooking a sloped green meadow that stretched to the bank of the lake. Below us the *curach* was pulled up on the soft grass. In the far distance, across the sun-sparked water, I could see the outline of the dock, and on the hill above it, the faint white blur that was Blackrock Cottage.

Mary took thick ham sandwiches from the basket, then pulled out a cold bottle of Pouilly-Fuisse wrapped in a wet towel. She held the golden bottle up to the light.

"My God!" I said. "Is that from Talbot's?"

She smiled. "Indeed it is. His ancestors sold wine to the gentry, when there were gentry here. Now he keeps it for himself." She gave me a wink. "I found there was a slight error in your account. Eddie mistook a *3* for a *6*. His eyes, he says, are not what they used to be, but he's not a bad soul for that."

I reserved judgment on the goodness of Eddie's soul.

For the first time in years, I felt at peace. Stretched out on the blanket, we watched a kestrel riding the thermals over the lake. Mary told me about her interrupted career at the university. She had studied at the University of London and at University College, Dublin. But when her widowed father had died, she had returned to Letterkilly to care for her grandmother.

"And now I'm a country weaver, you see. I might as well be living in your seventeenth century."

"A weaver? What do you weave?"

"You've seen a sample. The cloak I wore yesterday. I make them for a shop in Grafton Street. Pure Connemara wool. They sell them to the tourists for fabulous amounts. My grandmother taught me the art...."

I didn't know how to put the question. "Are you ... engaged?"

She raised herself on one elbow. "I'm not. I'm the granddaughter of Grace Callahan.... There's no one around here for me." She gave a bitter laugh. "There was a man ... when I was at the University of London...." She plucked a bit of grass. "I ... lived with him for two years. That's no great thing for you Americans ... but here, it's not done. We were going to be married. Then he left. Ah, well. You've troubles enough of your own, I suppose." She opened her hand, letting the grass blow away on the wind.

So I told her. About my life. The boredom and the anguish. When I finished I found myself holding her hand. It was the first time I'd touched a woman in twelve months.

We lay silently on the blanket. I was aware only of the soft touch of her hand and the sound of her breath.

"God save us! Will you look at

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that!" She sat up. Black clouds were spilling over the mountain behind us. The sun was still shining on the lake as the first drops of rain fell.

"Come on!" She jumped up and grabbed the basket. Carrying the blanket, I followed her up a narrow, rocky path. Fifty feet ahead was the black mouth of a cave. As we reached its shelter, the rain came down like a silver curtain.

"You know what they say of this country, 'If you don't like the weather, wait five minutes and it will change.'"

I spread the blanket, and we sat at the cave's mouth to watch the deluge. "Lucky you knew about this cave," I said.

She sat cross-legged on the blanket. "There're hundreds of them hereabouts. Pirates' caves."

"Pirates?"

She laughed. "Smugglers, then. Guns and whiskey in the old days, hiding from the British. There are stories that some of these caves still have cases of poteen stacked high as a man's head ... or God knows what else in them."

A cold draft blew on my wet back. "I can't see any good Irishman forgetting where he hid his whiskey."

"Nor can I." She crossed her arms over her breast. "A drop or two for warmth wouldn't be amiss now."

I pulled the blanket around us. She moved close against me. It was very warm.

• • •

I awoke to hear Mary singing in the kitchen. I'd slept well, and if there had been voices or mysterious figures in the night, I knew nothing of them.

When I came out, Mary was at the stove, wearing the long green dress. "I'm off today to Clifden. I have to see the dyer about some wool, but I'll be back in time to see to your tea." She poured me a cup of coffee and put the hot platter on the table.

I gave her a quick kiss, and she pushed me gently back into my chair, glancing at the window. "Be careful now, or Father Costello will be at the door with a stick in his hands, asking after your intentions...."

"I know my intentions."

"And so, well do I. Now eat your breakfast. I'm off."

"What about your grandmother? Can I look in on her for you?"

She stopped. "You mustn't... She ... she's very shy of strangers. There's ... nothing she needs."

I watched the MG move down the boreen in a cloud of dust. I washed up my dishes, then took a cup of coffee into the room where I'd left my typewriter and notes. The window was open and the room was warmer. The settle bed had been pulled out, and its blankets were pushed back. Mary must have opened it to air it. Again I noticed the faint smell of jasmine in the air.

I sat down at the table and sorted

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through a stack of photocopies. Letters of complaint from regimental officers. Defective muskets, weevily biscuits, lack of shoes and gunpowder. I thought of my own experiences. It's always the same. The life of the foot soldier hasn't changed since Philip of Macedon. Only the technology of death is different.

I put down the copies. I couldn't concentrate. I needed to move. I got my zippered blue nylon windbreaker and took a blackthorn walking stick from the stand by the door. An hour or two's walk and perhaps I'd have the energy to do some work.

I followed the road around the lake, walking toward the sea. The sun was bright and the wind fresh, bringing with it the salty tang of the distant tidal marsh.

I had gone almost two miles, walking briskly, swinging my stick and feeling very much the country gentleman. The road curved, and around the turn I saw a crumbling dry-stone wall. Beyond it were the remains of a long building, much larger than the usual cabin. The walls were collapsed in a pile of rubble, and at either end of the ruin were the truncated stumps of chimneys, standing like rotted teeth.

At the front of the building was a cinder path, which was well kept and bordered by whitewashed rocks. Curious, I followed the path around the building.

At the rear was a slate-paved court enclosed on one side by a pockmarked stucco wall. Set in the wall was a bronze plaque that read:

IN MEMORIAM
Killed in the Cause of Freedom
September 22 - 24 A.D. 1920

There were ten names listed in alphabetical order. The eighth name was Francis X. Maguire.

Francis Maguire was my grandfather's brother.

I stared at the plaque, then walked slowly back to the road, poking the high grass with my stick. Francis X. Maguire had to be my great-uncle. As a child I could remember veiled references to "Uncle Frank's" tragic death. Thinking back, it seemed that there was some implication that his death was connected with my grandfather's coming to America.

As I came onto the road, I saw a black figure approaching, pushing an ancient "gas-pipe" bicycle to which was strapped a turf cutter's slane. It was Willy, the old man I'd seen at Talbot's. He gave the Saint Vitus'-like snap of the head that is the countryman's "hello."

"Grand day, isn't it?" I said, returning the nod.

He stopped the bike and looked at me closely. "It is that. Visiting here, are you?"

Considering his condition when we'd last met, I was not astonished at

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his lack of recognition.

"I am. Lovely country here...."

He smiled. "American, are you? Have I seen you before? You've the look...." He leaned his bike against his hip.

"American, yes." I took out my cigarettes and offered him one.

"Ah. Grand cigarettes, these." He snapped off the filter. "Don't know why they put those little plastic plugs in them."

I gave him a light. "What's this place? There's a marker back there..."

"Indeed." He waved a gnarled hand. "There was a famous battle here. A terrible thing it was...."

"What happened? I read the names on the marker, and I'm sure my granduncle was one of them ... Francis Maguire...."

His head jerked. "Frank Maguire? You're a Maguire, then, are you?"

"Yes. What was this famous battle?"

He took a deep drag. "Well, now. That I couldn't say.... I was still in me petticoats then ... too young to know what was happening. There was a shoot-out here.... A great tragedy is all I can say."

He pulled a silver turnip-watch from his pocket. "Must be off, Mr. Maguire, God bless...." He touched his cap and swung his leg over the bike with remarkable agility.

I watched him pedal down the road. He was lying. Or at least evading. The Irish are not notably reticent about their heroes. I couldn't believe that a local man in his seventies would not know every detail about a "famous battle" on his doorstep.

Why did everyone freeze up when Maguires were mentioned? Even Mary.... I was determined to find out.

There was one place to start. The parish records. Despite what I'd been told by Talbot, there might still be Maguires in the area, or at least collateral relatives. Someone who could tell me what was going on. It might help to talk to the priest: these old country pastors knew everything that went on in their parishes.

I drove the Mini past the old stone church and the graveyard with its mossy, jackstraw tombstones. Beyond the church a curved, graveled road led up a small hill to a modern, stuccoed priest house.

It was hard to believe. Parked in front of the priest house was a mint-condition Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing, jacked up on blocks, a pair of denim-clad legs stuck out from underneath.

I had the momentary feeling I'd been cast in some Fellini movie. "Hello, down there...." I said.

I looked down at the blond giant on the mechanic's dolly. He sat up and put a wrench on the oily canvas at his side.

"Ah ... I'm looking for Father Costello," I said, remembering the name Mary had mentioned.

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The blond man smiled and rose from the ground in a single fluid movement.

"You've found him, then...."

"Father Costello?" The man couldn't be more than forty or so. I'd been expecting some toothless old druid in a dog collar, not some linebacker in blue coveralls.

"That I am. And who might you be?" He stuck out a hand the size of a first baseman's glove.

I introduced myself and explained that I was an historian and wanted to do some research in the parish records.

"That's no problem," he said. "We've a cellar full of them, you're welcome to those the bugs haven't eaten." He wiped his hands on a greasy rag.

I stared at the Gullwing. "What ... what's that doing here?"

He smiled. "This, you mean?" He jerked his thumb at the silver-gray machine. "Ah. That's mine. Costello's Folly ... or a memento thereof...."

While I am a mechanical klutz, I've always been attracted to exotic machinery. Finely crafted watches, weapons, or sports cars turn me on, as others are turned on by a symphony or a painting.

"What is it? A '55 or a '56?"

"A '57.... Last of the litter, this one." He patted its sleek silver side. "Are you interested in sporting machinery?"

"I have this recurrent dream, that I'll find a Bugatti 57C rotting in some farmer's barn...."

He laughed. "One of those, are you? Thou shalt not covet.... Come into the house while I clean up, then I'll show you the parish records."

I waited in the parlor. The room was spotless and smelled of furniture wax. Every wood surface was polished and the parquet floors were as slick as an ice rink.

A turf fire burned in the hearth. To its left stood a massive dark mahogany sideboard. At one end of the sideboard were three photographs in a gold triptych frame.

I moved closer. The left photo was of a much younger Father Costello sitting in the cockpit of a Formula I Lotus. The second showed him with another man, holding a large trophy. The background was unmistakably the track at Monza. The last photo showed a twisted mass of metal, only the shredded black remnants of the tires showing that this had once been a racing machine.

I heard footsteps behind me. "Ah. I see you've discovered the secret of my misspent youth."

I turned. Father Costello looked even taller in his black cassock. His hair was damp and his skin was pink.

"How did a man your size fit into a formula Lotus?"

He stood by me, looking at the photo. "With difficulty." He smiled. "I keep those as a reminder... I came

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to my vocation late." He pointed to the last photo. "You might say I found God when they pried me out of that.... Now, sit down, Mr. Maguire. Will you have a bit of Irish?"

"Well ... I...."

He opened the center doors of the sideboard. There were rows of bottles of all shapes and sizes. He poured three fingers of Jameson's into each of two thick Waterford tumblers.

I stared at the contents of the cabinet. There were more bottles than on the backbar of McDaid's in Dublin.

Father Costello sat in the chair opposite and watched me with amusement. "I'm not a 'whiskey priest,' Mr. Maguire. Though the temptation is there. Every time you tip your hat in this country, someone gives you a bottle. It's an occupational hazard."

I flushed. "I didn't...."

"Of course not, Mr. Maguire." He took a drink and balanced the glass on the arm of the chair. "I am here in Letterkilly for my sins, however. The bishop sent me 'to practice the lost art of humility,' he says."

"How long have you been here?"

"Five months and twenty-eight days it is, since old Father Mulrian retired. Him fifty years a priest, and forty-eight of them in this parish, God bless him."

"Do you have any Maguires in the congregation?"

"Maguires." He rubbed his chin. "There's no Maguire family here. Are you looking for relations?"

"I don't know what I'm looking for." I told him about the curious response I'd gotten from the locals.

"Well. You know how it is in the country. There are feuds and scandals that last for hundreds of years. I'll ask about discreetly, but if there's something odd ... I can't promise. I'm thought of here as a 'city' priest ... respected, but not one of them. Father Mulrian knew where all the bones were buried. For me it will be another twenty or thirty years...."

"If I could look at the parish registers...." I said.

"You're welcome to them. All the old ones are in the cellar."

The cellar was damp and cold. I saw at an old refectory table under a bare, harsh light and leafed through the leather-bound volumes of records.

They were there ... the Maguires. Births. Marriages. Deaths. My grandfather, his brother Frank, my grandmother, my father's sister. All of them.

Then, in 1920, the Maguires disappeared. I went through the records for the years 1921 - 40. No Maguires. I turned back to the 1920 register. There were entries for the 22nd and 24th of September. Ten men were listed as deceased. Six of them on the 22nd and four on the 24th. They were the names I'd read on the plaque.

Except for one birth in October,

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and one in November, the rest of the 1920 book was blank. No marriages, no deaths. Nothing.

As I swung off the road and started up the hill to Blackrock, a red Toyota pickup came at me head-on. I pulled over to let it pass. Eddie Talbot was driving. The back of the truck was loaded with boxes. He stuck his head out the driver's window.

"I've left the things Miss Callahan ordered at Blackrock. A box for you and a box for them. I couldn't make it above with this load."

"I'll see to it, Mr. Talbot."

He gave a faint smile. "I'm sure you will, Mr. Maguire." He flipped his hand and shot off in a cloud of dust.

At the cabin I found the marked boxes on the wooden bench by the door. I looked in the Callahan box. Flour, sugar, coffee, dishwashing liquid, and other jars and bottles. It was after four o'clock, and I didn't know whether or not Mary had returned. I hesitated for a moment, then picked up the box. It would give me a reason to see her. Like a kid, I thought. Any reason would do. If she wasn't there, I'd just leave it at the door.

I struggled up the rutted path. At the top it leveled off to a green pasture with ankle-high grass. The cabin was smaller than Blackrock, with blue-painted window frames and a slate roof. At one end, an old cow byre had been modernized and fitted with a window and an opaque glass door.

I paused for breath. Mary's MG was not there. Shrugging off my disappointment, I walked through the damp grass. I didn't want to disturb Mary's grandmother, I intended to leave the box and go. I bent to put the box by the doorstep.

To my left the glass door of the byre swung open.

"Stop where you are, Maguire ... or you're a dead man!"

I jerked upright, tilting the box. A bag of flour fell to the ground and burst.

A woman stood in the door — a small old woman, long silver hair framing her face like a witch's halo, a black dress covering her from neck to foot. She raised a shotgun to her shoulder, an antique 9-gauge goose-gun with a barrel as long as her body. The hammer clicked to full cock, and the muzzle centered on my chest.

"I swore I'd kill you if you came here, Maguire, and I will that, God curse your soul...." Her blue eyes were wild in her wrinkled face. Her knuckle whitened on the trigger.

"Granny! Stop!"

The old woman turned her head. I stepped forward and hit the barrel of the shotgun with my hand. It was like a Claymore going off in my face. A pound of shot ripped by my ear, and I could feel the powder sting my face and neck. A shower of slates ex-

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ploded from the cabin roof. Instinctively I hit the ground. When I looked up, the old woman was slumped against the door, tears streaming from her face. The goose-gun lay at her feet.

I rose to one knee. Mary ran toward us. "Dan ... Dan! Are you all right?"

My right ear was deafened from the blast. "Yeah. I'm O.K...."

"Ah. God save us...." Mary bent over the old woman. "Help me, Dan. We've got to get her inside." Her grandmother's eyes were closed and her breathing was irregular.

I kicked the old gun aside and picked her up. She was as light as a bundle of thatch. Her head pressed against my chest, and I could hear her murmur what sounded like "bobbobbob...." She smelled of jasmine. The flower scent I had noticed in the room at Blackrock.

I sat in a straight-backed chair by the fire while Mary put the old woman to bed. There was a ringing in my ears, and my face felt as if it had been sunburned. I stood up as Mary came into the room.

"I've got her down and I've given her a sleeping tablet.... Oh ... Daniel." She came close, and I put my arms around her.

Mary pressed her hands to her face. I could feel her body tremble. "You might have been killed. She'd have shot you for sure...."

"It's not the first time I've been missed." I tried to make my voice light, but my knees were shaking.

Mary looked up at me. "She ... she's not in her right mind. She doesn't know what she's doing."

"She seemed to know me...."

"Did she? Ah. Sometimes she lives in a world of dreams. She's very —"

There was a moaning cry from the bedroom.

"I've got to see to her. I'll come to you later...." She kissed me and hurried into the bedroom.

The sky was darkening when I got back to the cabin. The rising wind rustled the thatch, and across the lake black clouds rolled over the mountains; to the west, sheet lightning flickered on the horizon.

I lay stretched on the sofa, trying to read. The electric lamp over my shoulder brightened, then dimmed to a yellow glow. I lit an oil lamp.

A raucous, tinny screech sounded behind me, and I almost dropped the lamp. The sound came again, longer and more persistent. It was coming from the old wall phone by the door.

I picked up the round earpiece that hung from a frayed wire, and spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Maguire? Father Costello here...."

"Ah. Father."

"About the matter we discussed...."

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I was puzzled. "What...."

"The ... the books you were looking at. Can you hear me, Mr. Maguire? Mr. Talbot might be having some trouble at the switchboard...."

I got the message. The switchboard. All the local phones would go through the post office exchange, which meant that Eddie or one of his relatives would be listening in.

"Yes. I understand, Father."

"Good, then. I called Father Mulrian when I was in Clifden this afternoon, and I've some information for you. I'll come out after Mass tomorrow and have —"

There was a loud crackle in my ear. The line went dead.

It was almost nine o'clock before Mary came down. "She's resting now, I'm sure she'll be out of it till morning. Tomorrow I'll get the doctor from Clifden to come take a look at her." Her voice was soft and her eyes were swollen, as if she had been crying. I took her in my arms.

"Mary, what's happening? She called me by name when she tried to shoot me ... and I know she's been in that room. It was her perfume I smelled there, I'm sure of it."

"She's ... not well, Dan. She's old and she gets confused. That was her room, when she was a girl, when the family lived in this house."

"But what —"

She touched my lips. "I need you to hold me, Dan.... I'm afraid."

• • •

The wind had died down when I awoke. The oil lamp by the bed was burning low, and I could see moonlight scattered by the drops of rain on the windowpanes. I felt the soft warmth of Mary's breasts pressed against my arm, and the weight of her leg half thrown over mine. I watched her sleeping face, the shadowed eyes, the slightly parted lips. I was at peace. I was at home.

I don't know how long I lay there, in that warm, hypnagogic half-sleep state. Some persistent sound snapped me into full consciousness, a scraping sound, as if something was being dragged across the floor.

I gently disengaged myself from Mary and picked up my watch. It was 3:22 A.M. I slid from the bed and put on my pants and a heavy sweatshirt. Barefoot, I went to the kitchen and eased the door shut behind me.

The sound came from the other room. I moved to the door and pressed my ear to it. A woman's voice. I shoved against the door. It stuck, and then swung open. I stumbled into the room.

The settle bed had been pulled open, and the heavy scent of jasmine filled the room. By the open window the moonlight glinted on the ghostly figure of a woman in white. It was Grace Callahan.

She gave a cry as she saw me. "You...!"

I stopped, frozen. Before I could

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move, she was at the window. With the agility of a young woman, she swung over the sill and was gone into the night.

I ran to the window and looked out. A cloud darkened the moon, but I could see the running white figure, her long dress trailing in the grass. A keening wail filled the air as she ran toward the Mass rock.

"Dan! What was that?" I turned to find Mary in the doorway, fumbling with the buttons of her dress.

"It was your grandmother.... She was here ... in this room."

"Mother of God! Where is she? Where did she go?" Mary ran for the door.

"The Mass rock. She was headed for the Mass rock."

"We've got to find her. She'll die in this weather."

I followed her out, the wet grass icy on my feet. By the time we reached the rock, there was no sign of Grace Callahan.

Mary stopped. "She's going to die, Dan. I know it. We've got to find her."

"We will. I'll go back and get a flashlight."

"I think I know where to look for her, Dan. Go back and call Father Costello. Tell him to call the doctor in Clifden.... And ask him to come: she needs a priest."

"The telephone's out."

She turned. "Drive in, then, quickly. I'm after her...."

• • •

I checked the phone. It was still dead. I hurried to the bedroom and got my shoes. My fingers were cold, and as I fumbled with the laces, I heard a dull thudding at the door. The sound came again, and I heard a man's voice calling. I hurried to the kitchen and pulled the door open.

The man stood bent in the doorway, one hand against the wall. The other hand clutched his stomach. Blood ran over his fingers. It was the man I'd seen in the tree line.

He was hatless and his dark green tunic was torn, his polished black boots were spattered with mud. He raised his head, and I could see from his eyes that he was going into shock. He looked at me and stepped backward, his right hand moving toward the holstered gun at his hip. He lurched forward, then fell in a sprawl at my feet.

I rolled him over and kicked the door shut. His breathing was shallow and his pale skin was clammy. I got him under the arms and dragged him to the sofa.

He was a young man, still in his twenties, tall but not heavy. His face was thin and his nose slightly hooked. Under his clipped blond hair, there was a scar running from his temple to his right ear.

As I lifted him to the sofa, his revolver slid from the black leather holster and swung by its lanyard. It was an odd weapon, one that I'd seen

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in the collection at the National Army Museum. From the peculiar zigzag cam grooves on the cylinder, I recognized it as a rare Webley-Fosbury .455, a nonissue, semiauto revolver carried by British officers in two world wars.

I slipped the gun back into the holster. The man's dark green tunic was covered with blood. On his collar he wore a harp-and-crown insignia, but the uniform was not one I recognized.

I unfastened his Sam Browne belt and unbuttoned his tunic. It was a stomach wound, an inch or so to the left of his navel. I reached gently underneath him and felt his back. There was no exit wound.

The man's eyelids fluttered open. His head jerked as he saw me. "Get ... get away...." His voice was hoarse.

"Take it easy," I said. "Don't try to move. You'll be O.K. I'm going for the doctor."

He turned his head. "You're ... you're not one of them.... You sound like an American." His accent was public school English. What in hell was an armed and uniformed Englishman doing this far south?

"Yes. I am. The telephone's out, but I'm going for help."

There was a cold, slick sweat on his forehead. "I say, you must ... call the R.I.C., Dublin Castle ... Captain Lambert. Tell him Lieutenant Fowler.... They got the rifles...." His head rolled back.

He was out. I couldn't take the chance of loading him into the car; I knew he'd never survive the ride. I got some blankets from the bed and covered him. If the internal bleeding didn't get him, the shock probably would. I had to get help.

The Mini's wipers struggled against the sheets of rain that hit the car with the sound of ten-penny nails. I couldn't see more than twenty feet ahead, but I stayed in third gear and kept my foot to the floorboard.

I was only a mile or so from Letterkilly when it happened. I came up over a rise. A tree lay across the road. I slammed on the brakes and turned the wheel sharply to the right. The Mini took off, spinning twice. There was a jolting crunch as I broadsided the tree. The headlights lit up a root ball as big as the car. The engine died. The road was blocked.

It was a mile or more to the church. I got out and climbed over the tree. Before I hit the other side, I was soaked. I began to run.

By the time I got to the priest house, my lungs were burning and my legs felt like telephone poles. I staggered up the steps and punched the polished brass bell.

Father Costello opened the door. He stepped back as I stumbled forward.

"Maguire! Come in, man; you look like the rat in the pickle barrel...."

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He helped me to a chair and poured me an inch of Irish. I took the whiskey at a gulp and told him about Grace Callahan and the wounded officer.

"There's no way to get a doctor now," he said. "All the lines are out. I'll get my bag and the first-aid box and we'll do what we can...."

"The road's blocked. You can't get through."

He hesitated. "Eddie Talbot. We'll go by boat, then."

He opened a closet and took out a black bag and a large red first-aid kit.

"Tell me, this wounded officer. What did he say?"

"Told me to call a Captain Lambert at the Dublin R.I.C., whatever that is...."

Father Costello looked at me. "The R.I.C.? Are you sure that's what he said?"

"Yes. Said *they* got the rifles. Could the Provos be running guns for the North through here?"

Father Costello reached for his hat and raincoat. "That's not likely. The R.I.C., that stands for 'Royal Irish Constabulary.'"

"Royal Irish Constabulary?" I knew why I hadn't made the connection. *R.I.C.* "Father, there haven't been any Royal Irish Constabulary in this country for sixty or more years."

He pulled a black rain slicker from the closet. "That I know. Put this on. We'll get Eddie and his boat."

• • •

The forty-five-horsepower outboard roared as Eddie swung us away from his dock. Spray slapped the windscreen as he headed the twenty-foot fiberglass boat into the wind. I sat next to him, holding on to the damp vinyl seat.

"Make for the Blackrock landing, Eddie," Father Costello shouted from the cramped seat behind us.

"I will." Eddie shoved the throttle to the stop, and the bow came up as the boat cut through the chop.

The rain had slackened to a drizzle, and the moon came out from behind the ragged black clouds. Eddie reached inside his yellow oilskins and pulled out an unlabeled bottle. "Have a bit of this, Maguire. It'll warm your soul. Triple-run poteen, made on the premises. Not a word to the Garda, now." The red light from the instrument panel played on his face.

I took a drink and handed it back. Smooth as silk and hot as coals. Eddie lowered the level a good two inches and passed it to Father Costello.

We were in sight of the Blackrock dock when Father Costello shouted. "Ease off, man! What's that to the left?"

Eddie backed the throttle, and the bow came down. "There, Father?"

Costello leaned forward and pointed. In the distance I could see a black object floating on the surface.

"A *curach*...." Eddie spun the wheel. He reached under his seat and pulled out a heavy, battery-powered

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lamp. "Put a light on it, man." He handed it to me.

I flicked the switch. The beam caught the glistening bottom of the overturned boat. A white hand clutched at its side, then slid off.

"Jeezuz!" Eddie slapped the throttle into neutral and stood up. "Keep the light on it, Maguire...." He was out of his oilskins and kicking off his boots. Before I could answer, he was over the side and into the cold, dark waters of Lough Ross.

The boat lost way, and we were within ten feet of the *curach*. Eddie surfaced, gasping for air, pulling a body with him. The body moved feebly, arms splashing in the water. My light caught the long, wet hair, and the face turned toward me. It was Mary.

We got her aboard and wrapped her in a tarp. Father Costello gave her a drink from the poteen bottle.

"God's mercy, girl ... what are you doing out here? Another few minutes and you'd have been gone."

Mary choked on the whiskey. "Ah. Father, it's the grandmother. We've got to go after her. She's —"

"What do you mean?"

She bent forward, clutching the tarp around her. "She took the other *curach*.... She's headed for the cove, I think. I was trying to follow her when the wave hit me."

Father Costello put his arm around her. "Get going, Eddie. We'll catch her."

Mary looked up at me and took my hand. "Dan. She wasn't alone. There was a man with her. I saw them."

Eddie reached in the locker and pulled out a pair of Zeiss night glasses.

"Take a good look, Maguire. Your eyes are younger than mine."

"I can tell a *6* from a *3*...."

Eddie laughed and pushed the starter. We headed for the opposite shore. I swept the lake with the glasses, but saw nothing. Then, as we got closer to the shore, I caught a glimpse of white. I steadied the glasses. Two figures were moving over the grass above the cove.

"I think I see them. Starboard ... two o'clock."

Eddie turned the bow, and the boat jumped forward.

We were five yards from the beach. There was a loud scraping sound. Eddie threw the engine into reverse, and I lost my balance, dropping the glasses.

"Christ Jesus! We're aground." He glanced over his shoulder. "Sorry, Father."

"*Te absolvo*.... And get this bastard of a boat in, Eddie."

Eddie jockeyed the throttle. "Give us a dance back there."

Father Costello stood up and spread his legs, throwing his weight from side to side.

Mary grabbed my arm. "Dan. Look. Up there." Beyond the rock where

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we had had our picnic, a white figure moved, then was gone.

"Come on, Dan. Bring the light." Mary dropped the tarp and went over the side. I picked up the lamp and followed her into the icy water.

The water was up to my waist, but the bottom was firm. We made it up the slippery bank to the meadow, and I swept the area with the light.

"This way." Mary pointed to a trail of bent grass. We followed it up, past the rock, on to the cave in which we'd sheltered from the rain. The cave was empty.

"Where is she, Dan? Where could she have gone?"

I pointed the light at the ground. On the stones were faint spots of blood. I bent and touched one: it was fresh. Behind us the engine roared as Eddie and Father Costello tried to get the boat off the rocks. I turned the light on them. "Up here! This way...."

We followed the winding path and the erratic spatters of blood. Fifty yards up the hill, the trail turned left into a narrow cleft in the rocks. Ten feet ahead was the narrow mouth of a cave.

Grace Callahan was there. Her long white dress was wet and spotted with mud. She lay on her back as if she were resting, a fine lace veil covering her face. Her right hand held a rosary and a small bunch of yellow flowers, still moist from the rain. Her left hand was extended to touch the man at her side. No longer a man. The shreds of his dark green tunic clung to the bones of his rib cage, and his skeletal hand touched hers.

"Mary...." I held out my arm to stop her.

She gasped as she saw the figures. "She's dead, isn't she? It's her wedding dress she's wearing."

I put my arm around her. Her body shook, and she pressed her head against me. In the harsh light I saw the rotted remnants of a holster, and in it, the rusted lump of a pistol with odd zigzag marks on the cylinder.

There was a clatter of rocks. Eddie and Father Costello came up the path. They stood behind us. Then Father Costello moved into the light. He knelt and lifted Grace's veil, then closed her eyes.

At my side Eddie crossed himself. "God have mercy on them," he said.

The early-afternoon sun shone through the starched lace curtains of the priest house. Mary sat beside me, draped in a long black Kinsale cloak.

Across the glass-topped, Art Deco coffee table on which sat a silver tea service, Willy Flynn fidgeted in his chair, his cap balanced on the shiny knees of his Sunday suit.

The door opened, and Father Costello came in, wearing a white surplice over his cassock. Behind him was Eddie Talbot, in an old-fashioned, claw hammer coat. He carried a top hat with a long band of crepe, which

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hung down like a tail.

"Ah. You're here." Father Costello eased himself into the chair at one end of the coffee table, and Eddie sat down opposite him.

Father Costello looked at his watch. "We've an hour before the service." He nodded at Mary. "Will you pour?"

While Mary poured, Father Costello picked up a crystal decanter of brandy and added a shot to each cup. "Here's to Grace Callahan, a good woman, God rest her soul." We drank.

He looked at each of us in turn. "I've a few things to say about the ... events ... of last night. What we say here goes no further, is that understood?" He looked at Willy. Without waiting for a reply, he went on.

"I've talked with Father Mulrian, as I told you, Daniel. He told me about the Maguires and the Callahans ... but even he didn't know the whole story. What do you know about your grandmother's history, Mary?"

Mary put her cup on the table. "She was a fine, loving woman, but ... she was ... strange. My father never told me the whole story. All I know is that as a young woman she had a great shock.... It affected her mind." She paused and looked at Eddie and Willy. "I know what was said. I heard it often enough when I was a child. The old bitches. 'Mary Callahan, the bastard's daughter,' they called me. And her they called worse...." My father tried to get her to leave, to live with us in Dublin. But she wouldn't." She bent her head.

Father Costello sighed. "Christian charity ... a rare commodity it is. Half the women in this parish had seven-month pregnancies the first time around. Must be something in the air that does it, though it seldom happens after the firstborn. Mary girl, what do you know of your grandfather?"

She looked up, her eyes were red. "My father wouldn't talk about him. Only that he was killed in the war. Before he and Grace could be married."

Father Costello nodded. "He was indeed. But not the war you think. He was killed here.... Your grandfather was an English officer. A Black and Tan."

A Black and Tan. I knew what they were. Paramilitary police. Unemployed veterans, thugs, drifters, recruited from the streets of London in 1920 and sent over under General Macready to save Ireland for the British Empire.

Father Costello went on. "His name was Robert Edward Fowler. He and his men were posted to Letterkilly in 1920. He and your grandmother fell in love — not a popular thing for an Irish girl to do in those days, when British soldiers were being shot in the streets of Dublin.

"The family objected, naturally, but Grace wouldn't be stopped. There was no religious impediment to their getting married, as Lieutenant Fowler came from an old English Catholic

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family. Times were hard then in England. The streets were full of young officers back from the Great War. So ... when the chance came to serve with Macready, Fowler joined up."

Willy took a slurp of his tea. "Black and Tans. Divils they were...."

"Why were they called Black and Tans?" Mary asked.

"A bit of the Irish gallows humor," Eddie Talbot replied. "The story is that they were named after a famous pack of hunting dogs of that color."

I turned to Eddie. "What does that have to do with the Maguires?"

Father Costello leaned forward. "That's why I've asked Willy to be here. Father Mulrian said that Willy knows the whole story. You were there, weren't you, Willy?"

Willy paused like a performer waiting for his onstage cue. He lit a warty, black briar pipe and blew out a cloud of acrid smoke. "Indeed I was," he said.

"Those were hard days then," Willy began. "And hard men were there to meet them. De Valera was off in America making his speeches. Michael Collins, God rest him, and his boys were shooting British soldiers in the streets, and Liam Lynch was on the run with ten thousand British pounds on his head. The Brits were putting Sinn Feiners to the wall and burning the thatch over the heads of their widows.

"The police could do nothing — and indeed, the most of them had no heart for it. The I.R.A. — 'Volunteers' they were called — were blowing up the Constabulary barracks and the coast guard stations all over the country, ambushing and taking the guns wherever they could. That's when the English brought in the Black and Tans. A bad class of men they were, and their officers couldn't control them.

"I was only a boy of thirteen years, too young for the Volunteers, but I belonged to the Fianna, the boy's group. We carried messages and did the odd jobs for the older ones." He paused and helped himself to the brandy.

"My heroes in those days were Michael Collins, the chief of the I.R.A., and ... Frank Maguire.

"Maguire was the leader here in Letterkilly. A great hulk of man he was, a blacksmith by trade, and arms the size of a tree trunk. His brother, Thomas, had a farm. Thomas was a patriot, but he wasn't on active service; he had a wife and child, and another on the way.

"Now, Frank was a firebrand. He wanted to be in Dublin with Collins, or in one of the 'flying columns' that roamed about the countryside, striking at the Brits. A man of fierce temper he was. When he had the drink in him, he'd curse God and Collins for keeping him here.

"You see, here in Letterkilly there was nothing going on, or at least

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nothing that the Dublin boys wanted to call to the attention of the authorities. We were taking guns in over the strand, off-loading them from fishing boats and hiding them in the caves. Mauser rifles they were, German guns from the Great War, and where they came from I've no knowledge, but Frank Maguire was in charge of it all. But it wasn't only orders from Dublin that kept Frank here ... there was Grace Callahan."

Willy blew a cloud of smoke at the ceiling. "Ah. Poor Grace. She was a great beauty then, a lovely thing, not more than eighteen years. The Callahans and the Maguires were thick as porridge in those days, and it was all of us thought that Frank and Grace would marry, and sure Frank was mad for her. As I said, he was a man of quick temper, and strong as an ox. If there were other young men who had eyes for Grace, they kept it to themselves.

"Letterkilly was the back end of nowhere. The Volunteers would meet each night in Talbot's, where Eddie's father kept the back room just for them. They'd sit there, swilling the stout, with their pistols on the table. They were all keen to get into the fight, but they knew they had a job to do.

"In July it was, the Black and Tans came. The seventeenth of the month — I remember the day well because it was my birthday, and Collins's men had shot a British colonel and a police inspector at the country club in Cork. At the time I thought it was a grand way to celebrate the day.

"Black and Tans were being posted to towns and villages all over the country. Here they took over the old coast guard barracks by the lough. Ten of them there were: a Captain Lambert, Lieutenant Fowler, and eight men.

"Lambert, now, was an odd class of man. A little banty of a fellow, all puffed up with himself. To him, all of us were Sinn Fein — 'bloody Shinners,' he called us. Said if there was any trouble, he'd burn the town and shoot the lot of us. Fowler was a different sort, a decent man. You could see he didn't like the whole situation, but he did his duty, and he wasn't a heathen like the rest, he was to Mass every Sunday.

"Lucky it was for us that Lambert spent most of his time at Dublin Castle, toadying up to the generals and such. Lieutenant Fowler kept the men under control, and a scurvy lot they were. The Volunteers would have shot them all — and indeed, Frank Maguire asked for permission to attack and burn the barracks, but Collins wouldn't allow it. He wanted things kept quiet because of the gunrunning.

"And so it was a standoff, and it would have stayed so, had not Grace Callahan fallen in love with Fowler. How it happened I couldn't say ... but it was a great scandal when the banns were read in the church. Tongues

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were wagging at both ends, and the Callahans were shunned by all. Dangerous it was, too: in some places women were shaved or put to tar and feathers for walking out with a British soldier. But Grace Callahan paid no mind, she was young and in love.

"Frank Maguire fell into a black fury. He drank away his wits in the back of Talbot's, and waved his pistol about, saying he'd shoot Fowler on sight. It took five good men to hold him down. To this day you can see the mark on the backroom wall where he put his fist to it.

"Frank stayed drunk for a week. When he came out of it, he put a good face on it, and no one knew what he was planning. He wrote once more to Collins — I saw the letter myself — asking permission to attack the barracks and claiming there were two Lewis machine guns in the barracks, to sweeten the take. But again he was refused.

"The marriage was to take place on the twenty-first of September. Father Connor, him that was before the Mulrian, was to do it. In the priest house and not in the church, as it was made clear to Connor that if they were married in the church, there would be a great danger of fire.

"Poor misfortunate Grace, lovely girl that she was.... It was in the early afternoon of the twentieth. My mother had sent me to Talbot's for a cake of salt, and old Cathal Talbot was behind the counter. I could hear the shouts and laughter from the back room, where Frank and his boys were having a few jars.

"Grace Callahan came in. Ah. She was a sight to see. Even at my age I was in love with her, no matter what was said. I was about to leave when out of the back room came Frank Maguire and two of his men. He was drunk, and his face turned black as bog water when he saw Grace standing there.

"'The British whore, is it?' were his words. He spat on the floor at her feet. 'I'll geld that pretty Brit of yours when I see him.' He laughed. 'He'll be of no use to a slut like you then.' He reached out and grabbed her by the arm.

"She slapped at his hand. 'Let go of me, Frank Maguire.... You're a brave one to handle a woman, you with your pistol and your courage from the bottle.'

"Frank stepped back. I've never seen such a look on the face of a man. He turned to the men standing behind him.

"'Listen to this bitch who squats for an English dog. An insult she is to every decent Irishwoman.'"

Willy leaned forward and bent his head. His voice was soft. "I wish to God I'd never seen it. Before I knew what was happening, they dragged Grace Callahan to the street. One of them took a pair of shears from Talbot's stock. They ... they cut off her hair down to the bone. Then Maguire

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ripped the dress from the poor girl's back and shoved her down the road in her shift."

Willy was silent. I touched Mary's hand. It was cold and trembling. "What happened then, Willy?" Father Costello asked.

"That wasn't the end of it. As I say, I was in the Fianna; we took turns, we boys, doing the odd jobs and running messages, though most of the work was bringing a fresh jar or two from the bar. An honor, we thought it, and that night was my turn.

"I sat in the corner, keeping the mouth still, and watching the men. Frank was in an odd way, cold as ice and sober as a nun he was. 'Boys,' he says, 'I've great news. I've word from Adjutant General Collins himself. We're to burn the barracks and take their rifles....'

"They were all excited. 'When will it be?' asked one.

"'This very night,' says Frank. 'And no quarter given.'

"Ten men there were in the room, and four not present. Maguire sent me on Cathal's bicycle to round up the others. I didn't know about killing then — I thought it was like some boy's story, a great romance it seemed — and I felt a part of it when the men I called pulled their guns from the thatch and headed for Talbot's. I knew nothing of killing then, but I did afterward.

"I didn't see what happened at the barracks that night, but it was soon enough we all knew. Frank attacked, and Fowler and his Black and Tans put up a fight until Maguire's men were able to fire the place. Eight men there were with Fowler then, and all but one was killed; I saw the bodies the next day with my own eyes. It was said that Maguire himself shot Lieutenant Fowler. The lieutenant was badly wounded, but somehow he got away. The story was that he escaped across Lough Ross in a boat ... but his body was never found.

"It was a lie, of course, that Maguire had told. He had no approval from Collins, and there were no machine guns there. Ten rifles and a few pistols they got, and the store of ammunition went up in the flames. But it wasn't the Maypole dance that Maguire expected. Fowler did his duty like a man, and his men put up a good fight. Six of the Volunteers were killed that night."

Willy sighed and rubbed his head. "One of the Black and Tans got away on a motorbike and took the word to Dublin Castle. It was the morning of the twenty-fourth that they came. My family lived at the end of the High Street, where my father had the draper's shop. I was in my bed above the shop when I heard them. I looked out the window. The sun was just coming over the mountains. I could see the big Crossley lorries with a Lewis gun on each one. Four loads of them there were, with cocky Lambert at their head.

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"When I saw their hats, my legs shook to loosen the slates. Green tams they wore ... the Auxiliaries — 'Winnie's Boys,' some called them, for they were recruited by that very same Churchill, who was one of the English war chiefs in those days.

"Now the Black and Tans were mostly riffraff, but not these boys. Tough men they were, officers everyone, from the Great War, and rows of ribbons on their chests. I was out of my wits with the fright, for it was only a day or so since the British had burned the town of Balbriggan to the ground. Certain it was that Maguire had brought the wrath of God on our heads.

"And it was so. They blocked off the town and sent out their patrols. Man, woman, and child, they herded us like sheep into the graveyard and kept us there, with their machine guns looking straight at us and a finger on every trigger.

"Maguire and three of his men were caught in their beds, and they brought them in with their hands tied behind them. Lambert strutted up and down, calling us 'Shinners and murderers.' He had a bit of paper, and he read off the names of Maguire and the others — how he knew I couldn't say; perhaps someone gave them up to save the village from burning.

"Lambert gave us all a long speech full of 'In the King's Name' and 'Law of the Land' — when God knew, the only law in those days came out of a gun. They threw Frank and his boys in the back of a truck. Lambert was for marching the whole town out to the barracks to watch, but the Auxiliary officers stopped him. So they took Frank and his men out to the ruins of the barracks and put them against the wall.

"Fortunate it was for Thomas Maguire that he'd taken his family to Clifden three days before, for the very name Maguire would likely have gotten him killed. It was after that he left the parish with his family and made his way to America.

"Michael Collins near to had a fit when he heard what happened. It was said that he was grateful to the British for saving him a bullet, for he'd of shot Frank Maguire himself for breaking discipline. Collins put Lynch's men on the lookout for Lambert, and a month later they caught him at a restaurant in Grafton Street and shot him dead over his dinner.

"And that was the end of it for us, but not for Grace Callahan, poor soul. She was never right in the head after that. Sometimes in the years that came, we'd see her wandering the fields and hills in her white wedding dress, looking, it was said, for her lover."

The room was silent. From the church came the slow tolling of the bell.

"Thank you, Willy. Will you show Dan Maguire the clipping you have?"

Old Willy reached into his pocket

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and drew out a frayed yellow bit of newsprint. He handed it to me.

It was the front page of *An t-Oglach The Official Organ of the Irish Volunteers* for September 26, 1920. It was headed "Massacre at Letterkilly," but it wasn't the article that caught my eye. It was the picture, a grainy photo of a man. Underneath, the captain read "Frank Maguire — Murdered by Auxiliaries" ... I was looking at my own face.

Willy drained his cup and got up. "I've got to be getting the missus for the service." He left.

Eddie rose. "And I've got to see my boys have done things right for the burial." He reached out and shook my hand. "You're a good man, Dan Maguire." He looked at Mary and me. "It's come full circle, hasn't it now ... the Callahans and the Maguires? Come and have a jar with me when you can, and God bless the both of you." He left the room.

Father Costello stood and straightened his surplice. "There're only the three of us who know what happened last night, and that's the way it will stay." He smiled. "I've enough on my plate without the bishop hearing that I've been chasing after a ghost in my parish.... And you can imagine what the London tabloids would say. 'I.R.A. Victim ... British Officer's Bones Found After 60 Years.' ... The 'Ghost of Galway' or some such. We don't need that kind of notice."

Mary dried her eyes with her handkerchief. "What about him ... Lieutenant Fowler ... my grandfather?"

Father Costello put his large hand on her shoulder. "We couldn't leave him there, could we? He deserved to be buried in consecrated ground. So they're together now, the two of them."

"What do you mean, 'together'?" I asked.

"She was only a bit of a thing, Grace Callahan.... So we put them together in the box. It seemed the decent thing to do. Fortunate it is that among his other trades, Eddie is our undertaker, so there's no one else to know."

"Thank you, Father. That eases my heart." Mary stood up and kissed the priest on the cheek.

He smiled at us. "And what about you two?"

"Shall I tell him now, Dan?"

"Yes."

Mary flushed. "Father, when all this has settled down, we'll be asking you to read the banns."

He gave me a great clap on the back. "I will that." He took my hand in his and shook it. "You're a fortunate man, Dan Maguire."

He turned and went to the door. "I'll get ready for the service now...." He stopped and smiled at us. "And as for you two ... I suggest you avoid the occasion of sin." He shook his finger. "I'll have none of that in my parish."

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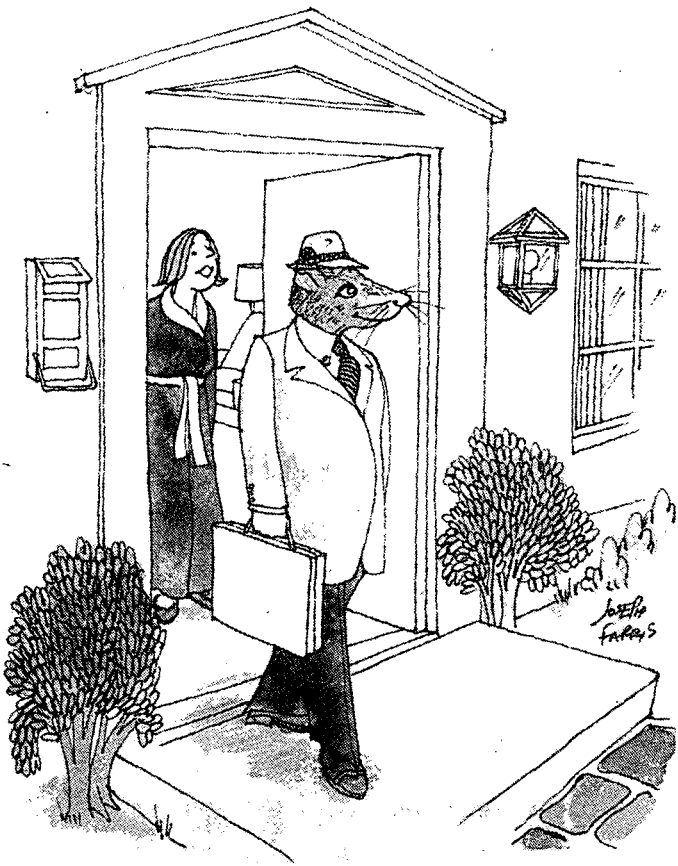
. . .

The day was bright and clear. As it had been on that tragic day sixty-five years ago, all the village was gathered in the graveyard. With Mary at my side, I watched as Eddie and his three sons lowered Grace Callahan and Robert Edward Fowler into their grave.

Perhaps it was my imagination, but as the silver-handled box went into the ground, I caught a faint scent of jasmine in the crisp, cold air.

For Snooper 6 and
Darkhorse 16



"Enjoy the ratrace, dear."

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Gregor Hartmann's first F&SF story concerns an assassin and his victim, a scientist turned mystic. Mr. Hartmann has just completed a novel about Americans living in Japan. He is the author of HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE S.P.L.A.T., a satire on the S.A.T. and A.C.T., published by Morrow in 1983. His short stories have appeared in Galaxy *and* New Dimensions.

Six of Swords

BY
GREGOR HARTMANN

I like to travel. That's good, considering my line of work. When I got the Proton job, I was pleased because it meant I could go to Japan, mass-transit heaven. Consider: I flew in on a 747, arriving at the New Tokyo International Airport at Narita. From the terminal I rode an electric train into Tokyo proper. That let me off at Ueno Station. From there I took a subway to Tokyo Station, where I transferred to a bullet train. Gorgeous machines, those bullets. You cruise along the coast at 200 kilometers per hour and barely feel a vibration. In only six hours I was in Hiroshima, where I spent the night. The next day I took a streetcar to the port, where I caught a hydrofoil — a hydrofoil! — out to the island of Shikoku. Shikoku's a little primitive; from the port a bus took me around the coast to a small town. At the town I took a ferry to yet another island, the tiniest yet, the one where the Foundation said Proton was hiding.

Elapsed time, Princeton to island: forty-seven hours. Twelve thousand miles in ten transfers. Leaping from machine to machine like Eliza on metal ice floes. I'm glad the Japs machines run on time. In America we're losing that knack. Too many Ecos, ranting about Big Bad Technology. Not to mention traitors like proton.

The island wasn't primitive, it was neolithic. Old wood buildings were scattered at random above a narrow beach, dropped where the tide had left them. The place had a name I couldn't pronounce, but it looked more like a fishing camp than a legitimate village. My ex-wife would have called it quaint; to me it was a dump. The twisty lanes between houses were made of dirt and rock, and the main

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form of transportation seemed to be the foot. Drying squid hung on clotheslines like flat white girdles. The people looked poor. In Tokyo everyone wore Western business clothes; here they were still in kimono and sandals. I felt like a time traveler from the future. Tracking the renegade scientist through the centuries....

Lunch was a bowl of rice and vegetables in a ramshackle waterfront café that stank of fish and seaweed. The Japanese summer was annoying: hot, humid, thickening the space between buildings, slowing movement as if invisible gelatin filled the air. The natives didn't seem to mind, but I felt encased in plastic. Two high school kids were staring at me, so I took out the Fodor's guidebook and pretended to be a tourist. Fodor's said this was the season of *Bon,* the Feast of the Dead, when spirits of the dead return to visit the living.

> Families put out lanterns to light the way home for deceased ancestors. In the home, altars with food are set up. After three days of visiting the spirits are sent back to the other world by setting adrift little lantern boats. These are small lanterns with a wooden base, so they float. On midsummer nights Japanese streams and lakes are lined with fire, blazing with spirit ships sailing to the other shore.

• • •

I slammed the book shut. Japan had some of the most advanced technology in the world. They were building computers that thought, designing their own space program. How could they tolerate this garbage? The Foundation should station some agents in Japan.

It just goes to show superstition is everywhere. No matter how high we build the dikes of science, that dumb brute ocean is out there, waiting for us to relax our vigilance. For four centuries we scientists have been reclaiming our lands, pumping out lies, leaching out the religious salts. Yet it waits. Waits for the Ecos to drill their holes and open the gates and let it surge back in.

I ran my mind over the periodic table to calm myself.

It was 12:30 when I finished lunch. I planned on catching the 5:15 ferry back to civilization. Each job has its own rhythm, pace, momentum. I've done jobs where I didn't even set foot on the ground, where I flew into town, threw someone off a hotel balcony, flew out an hour later. The other extreme is to spend two months wheedling my way into an inner circle. Proton looked like a two-hour job. He was wide open, the scouts said. When I wandered by his house, my observation confirmed that. No protection that I could see. That made me suspicious. Proton had been a high-ranking corpo scientist before he jumped ship; he knew about secur-

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ity. I walked through his neighborhood pretending to be a tourist, camera clicking like a Geiger counter. Actually, that wasn't a bad comparison. The "camera" was a device for scanning infrared, electromagnetic, ultrasonic. According to it, this village wasn't even electrified. The main fuel seemed to be kerosene!

I came to a little graveyard, which showed more signs of ancestor worship. Old women were sweeping around the stones and arranging fresh flowers. Those who weren't cleaning were chanting some garbage. Smoke from incense hung in the air like burnt flowers. If they spent all summer worshiping the dead, what did they do in winter? The whole scene gave me the creeps.

Travel is hard on some people. Not me. Travel helps me rise to the energy level I need to smash through barriers and zap my target. Plane to train, bus to boat — I gain energy at each transfer, like a charged particle in a linear accelerator, each jolt pushing me closer to the speed of light, till I shoot out the end of the bullet train, a bullet of infinite mass aimed at an unsuspecting proton.

Not this time. Not here. The island was grounding me, draining my travel buzz. Perhaps my scientific mind didn't work in this century? I visualized the actinide series of the periodic table. Radioactive elements, active radio, beaming energy to me: thorium, protactinium, uranium, neptunium, plutonium....

His house slumped tiredly on a slight hill overlooking the Pacific. At 4:10 I went up and knocked on the door. It wasn't locked. Proton blinked at my casual sports coat, my good-guy white hat.

"Ah, I've been expecting you. Come in, come in."

I stared back at him, feeling the comforting click when a face you know from file photos matches a live one. He was about sixty. Wearing a blue and white kimono, from which extended a thin neck. I like thin necks. Structurally the neck is a stack of plates. Designed to resist gravity. Does a fine job as long as the load is vertical. But hit it from the side and see what happens. One hard punch at the third vertebra....

"I'm sorry, you must be confusing me with someone else," I said smoothly. "I'm —"

"Yes, yes, you're a poor lost tourist. Except that no tourists ever come here. The Foundation sent you to kill me. But you're too late," he said.

"Really?" Half listening. Ears filled with adrenaline's song. No one in sight; leap forward then knock him back into the house....

"Yes. I've finished my work. Come in and we'll discuss it. I have a message for the Foundation."

I entered cautiously. No one hiding behind the door. He made me remove my shoes and socks and put on soft slippers before I stepped on

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the floors — some kind of grass mat he wanted to protect. His slippered feet hissed on the mats. The inside of his house was one large space, with sliding doors to partition off areas for rooms. In one corner was an altar with cookies and rice balls: a snack for the spirits.

We were alone. I waited till he sat down, then took a place a few feet away. He sat cross-legged; I squatted so I could move fast. Both eyes and instruments told me he was unarmed, but I hadn't survived this long by accepting the obvious.

Strictly speaking, he should have been recycled protein by now. The Foundation didn't want Proton's message, it wanted his obit. But last-minute negotiations were within the parameters of my orders. I was wired for telemetry; back in New York my superiors were watching this encounter. If they decided to talk to the renegade, they'd tell me so via the speaker in my right ear. If not, I'd carry out my mission.

"Some tea?"

"No, thanks."

"I guess you can't drink on duty." He laughed at his little joke and poured himself a cup of brown-green liquid. "*Bancha.* Cold barley tea. It's a wonderful drink on these hot days." He sipped it noisily. "My work is done. Not only that, I've already mailed it off to my friends. So there's no point in killing me."

"Work? What have you been doing?"

"I designed a new tarot."

The man before me had once been known as Dr. Eric Nicholson, Ph.D. in nuclear physics from the University of California at Berkeley. He was visiting professor at the Nobel Institute of Physics in Stockholm, NSF senior fellow at the Niels Bohr Institute in Copenhagen. For twenty years he'd poked and pried at subatomic particles, on the track of the elusive epsilon binding force. With no warning —no brain tumor, no divorce, no upheaval in his personal life — he'd left his research post, changed his name to Proton, and turned mystic. He wandered from campus to campus, preaching a doctrine of matter as consciousness, of atoms as psychons in a dream of a dream. The media loved it. The stress of rapid social change was bringing out religious fanatics; you couldn't go get a pizza without tripping over an apocalyptic preacher. Proton made good copy because he had solid scientific credentials. Within a year the Foundation's Social Rationality Index had dropped seventeen points. The trustees met, and decided it was time to cancel his account.

"A new tarot. Just what we need," I said, voice heavy with irony. "We can't even drill for oil without some fool babbling about raping the Earth Mother, and you lend your prestige to the tarot."

"The old tarot was a product of its time. That is its glory and its limit. It

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was created during the Middle Ages, by an agricultural civilization whose highest technology was the waterwheel and whose main concern was fruitful reproduction. I've designed a tarot for the scientific era. The postatomic tarot."

"Isn't that a contradiction in terms? A scientific tarot?"

"Shocks you, doesn't it?" I had the feeling he was speaking past me to my silent monitors, and past them to the trustees who would eventually view this confrontation on videotape. The condemned man speaks from the gallows, spitting at his executioners.

"Superstition is the enemy of science."

"Superstition is a subjective judgment. Objectively speaking, the tarot is just a tool. An instrument sensitive to forces we don't fully understand. That's why I had to come out here, on this rock facing the Pacific, to develop my postatomic tarot. There's too much interference in cities. That's why the old one works so poorly now; the air is saturated with electromagnetic radiation. The ocean grounds it out, lets my tarot detect the subtler forces that stitch together the universe. I think science would have developed differently if our laboratories had been in isolated rural regions instead of cities."

"We'd still be in the Stone Age."

"Perhaps." He grinned impishly. "Would that be so bad? Think of all the natural laws to discover. Powerful scientists lived then. I knew you were coming because the cards told me."

"Bullshit."

"Fact. You burned like a comet, roared like thunder. Yesterday you crashed into Japan, and the cards trembled like seismographs. In your wake the paddies dried up and the rice plants withered. Green tea turned black and paper fans folded, because the machine man was hunting the wizard."

The bastard was baiting me. Before I could respond, a tiny voice buzzed in my ear.

(Keep him talking.)

Good thinking, fellas. I'd realized that the instant he said he'd mailed off his work. To whom? An Eco cell? An underground? Maybe the Foundation would want him taken alive for interrogation. The old man seemed willing to have a tea party. "How about showing me these omniscient cards?" I said.

Proton's eyes disappeared in a nest of wrinkles when he smiled. "I knew you couldn't resist." He lifted one of the grass mats and took from beneath the floor a bundle wrapped in a purple and white cloth. "This is my personal set. I apologize for the crudeness of the images. I'm not an artist." He passed me the deck.

The cards were rectangles of white cardboard. The images he'd chosen were a star, DNA spirals, a clock, bacteria.... The four suits were Earth, Air,

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Water, and Fire. I ran the entire deck for the benefit of the TV camera in my sunglasses. A skyscraper. The Moon. Four people picking green things off a tree. A logarithmic table. In the corners were notes and mathematical symbols I didn't recognize. Even in his amateurish sketches, the juxtapositions of images and content were striking.

"Care for a reading?"

I hesitated. The cards tingled.

"Go ahead, they won't bite."

Annoyed, I shuffled the cards haphazardly and shoved them back at him. Proton dealt out twelve in an H pattern. Then his mind sank into it, and his body was empty for a while. Despite the hocus-pocus, I shivered. I thought of electron shells, K L M N O P Q, and filled them with whirling defenders: 2, 8, 18, 32.... After a few minutes his mind resurfaced and looked out through his eyes again.

"The Spaceship. That's you. Power, speed — yet hard to touch. Hard to the touch. Walled off against the outside, against threatening powers. I see a man afraid of changes, who uses science and engineering as charms to protect himself from dangers....

"The Skyscraper is the tower you serve. Precise, rational, heavy. But the position. Hmmm.... You are afraid of something. Someone. Speed and travel are attempts to stay in motion, to avoid giving your enemy a shot at you. It is a man. A superior?

I shrugged, poker-faced.

"No water cards.... Your love life is dry, barren. Scorched by the fire of your intellect, burning out of control. You're divorced?"

"Who isn't?" I glared, embarrassed that people back in New York were hearing and seeing this. Sitting around a console laughing at me.

"As for the future," Proton continued, as if he hadn't heard, "the Six of Earth — Six of Swords in the old deck. The ferryman. Appropriate for a traveler. Bearing you where, I wonder." He turned over a card that was facedown.

The Black Hole.

With one bound I scattered the cards and was on him, knocking him over, my arm around his throat. "Is this all of the cards? Are you hiding any?"

Gurgles and choking. I relaxed the pressure slightly and let him gulp a mouthful of air. "Yes, yes, this is all. For God's sake, I *want* the Foundation to see these. I want *everyone* to see them. The postatomic tarot is a tool for all humanity, not just an elite."

I released him. He touched his aching throat and eyed me reproachfully. "I used to be like you, sick with scientific hubris, dreaming of remaking the world in my own sterile image." He shook his head. "Instead the world remade me. It's like gravity. Resist and you're pulled apart. Be fluid and your mind flows into won-

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drous new realms."

"Soggy thinking is destroying Western Civilization. I've taken an oath to defend it."

"You're deluding yourselves. You can't kill mysticism by killing mystics any more than the Church could eliminate science by killing scientists. When this sick, rotten civilization collapses, the old arts will rise from its rubble like trees breaking through a parking lot."

"Hah!"

"Future generations will thank me for combining magic and science. I'm not antiscience, you know. I wish you technocratic bigots would see that. I'm just pro-reality, even if that includes what you call 'magic.' By blending science with the tarot, I'm ensuring the survival of key scientific concepts through the coming Dark Ages."

I was only half listening. Proton was too far gone for reprogramming. No wonder the Foundation wanted him dead. If there were others helping spread his lies, it was logical to take him alive for interrogation, but the speaker in my right ear was silent. Come on, guys. Make a decision.

He poured himself more tea. "I'll have some of that," I said. What was keeping them back in Princeton? I could imagine the arguments, the supervisors afraid to take responsibility for altering the mission. Still leery of tricks, I chose a teacup and poured the tea myself.

"What makes a good physicist go mystic?" I asked.

"Keeping an open mind."

My tiredness dropped a quantum and became exhaustion. The room swirled. I tried to leap at him, but my legs wouldn't work. He looked at me sadly as I slumped to the floor.

"The tea," I gasped.

"The slippers," he said. "They contain *kodoryu,* a paralyzing poison the fishermen use to kill sharks. You absorb it through the skin. Feet get sweaty in this climate, so it works quickly. I'm sorry I have to kill you, but you'll feel no pain."

My face sagged into the floor. The mats smelled of dry grass.

Gently he removed my sunglasses. He looked into them, into the hidden camera. "And now, gentlemen, I bid you farewell."

When I came to, I couldn't see. I closed my eyes. Oh my God, I'm blind. My head felt O.K. — Proton must have miscalculated the dosage. When I dared peek again, I realized everything looked funny because it was dark. I sprang to my feet. Next time I wouldn't be so cocky. Next time I saw the old man, I'd pop his neck like a piece of dry bamboo.

The house was empty. I ran outside.

My instruments and transmitter were dead, but I didn't have time to deal with that now. Fog had come in,

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ılurring the village. No lights anywhere, but the air itself had a faint ıacreous shimmer. I stumbled over he roadstones. Pushing through the nist was like wading through oatmeal. He would try to get off the island; I headed toward the waterfront.

The houses' gray eyes looked on ilently. No people anywhere. They'd 'anished like fish when a shark swims ›y. Hiding from me? Fine. No one to ee when I caught Proton.

Fishing boats leaned on the sand. ıt last some light: torches burned in heir prows. The ocean was deathly till. Far out in the mist, I saw one ›oat vanishing.

I ran down the beach to the near:st boat. A Japanese fisherman squated there, gray face impassive.

"I want to hire your boat." He tared off to sea, blank. "Me. Go out. 'ollow boat!" I gestured, waved mon:y, jumped in.

He shrugged and slowly, dreamily, cast off.

The boat had vanished in the mists in front of us, but its wake told me where it was. A series of V's, rippling the glassy water, arrowheads pointing to my prey. Delta *v* for the connoisseur of velocity.

The night was so quiet you could hear sails flapping, water splashing from our hull. Something made me look back; we were being followed by the entire fleet of boats. Torches flickered on their decks; the firelight shining through their sails made them look like giant lanterns. Each boat bore the same Japanese symbol on its sail. I wondered what it meant.

Despite my tension, the adrenaline in my body, I was curiously calm, aloof, light. I settled down to enjoy the chase.

I like to travel.

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In "Sport of Kings," Edward F. Shaver ("A Choice of Dreams," August 1982) humorously illustrates what happens when a group of rather jovial aliens encounters one aspect of "the seamier side of human life" and takes to it like ducks to water.

Sport of Kings

BY

EDWARD F. SHAVER

Tuesdays were always garbage day.

Of course, that's my own translation. The Telosian word is actually *gra-bagryial,* with a literal meaning of "many gifts." But I was the one who sorted through the stuff, and I knew that my interpretation was closer to the truth.

Tuesdays were always *garbage* day, that's how I remember when it all began.

Well, for the sake of accuracy, I suppose we must go back to those first heady days after the Telosian fleet appeared in the skies of Earth: great shining ships that moved with a silent grace and convinced all of humanity that the toils and petty hatreds of our small planet were insignificant indeed. Who hasn't seen the picture on the cover of *Life* that captured the Telosian flagship, washed in the red of sunset as it hovered over the U.N buildings, dwarfing the skyline of Manhattan? A classic image that spelled the euphoria of that time, when everyone was certain that all the problems of the world would soon be banished forever.

So certain were we all that every nation of the Earth signed an eternal Declaration of Peace, abolished standing armies, and universally embraced a new order of humanity that would be destined to last about a week and a half. (It would probably have survived two weeks if not for the Labor Day weekend.)

Many people vented their frustrations on the Telosians, but it wasn't the aliens' fault. They made contact with the best of intentions: to give us helpful guidance, to offer an example of what the future might hold if we managed to control our destructive

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impulses, and in general to be a stabilizing force for the people of Earth. But they *did* have their own beliefs about noninterference, which no amount of pleading or whining seemed to budge.

"You must learn for yourselves," the ambassador was fond of repeating in his lisping English, and you quickly learned to step back in deference to that final *s*.

And so the confetti settled and mankind returned to a semblance of normalcy. A full city block was razed across the street from the United Nations Plaza, and an embassy of the proper proportions for the twelve-foot Telosians was constructed. The embassy was staffed by the best minds from around the world — at first an easy task since every man and woman of intellect thought that the Telosians would be veritable fountains of knowledge about the Great Truths of the universe. That was how I came to be here. Jonathan Beyer, PH.D. in sociology, history, medieval economics.

Unfortunately, that, too, proved to be slight exaggeration of reality. The Telosian ambassador was a marvelous fellow, but he was *not* the Albert Einstein of his race. I myself like to think of him as extraterrestrially average, a sort of cosmic C student. And the only Great Truths to be learned concerned the Telosians' general messiness (I think they believe that litter is an offering to universal randomness), and their fondness for the alcoholic beverages of lesser worlds.

I must admit I was perplexed by this for a while, since I had the same imagined notions of the Telosians as superior in every way. Then one day when the ambassador was particularly depressed about the sameness of this life in the embassy, and well into his third case of Budweiser, he made a startling confession. His assignment as representative to Earth was a *punishment* for some unspecified blunder.

"This isn't exactly the Big Apple of the galaxy," the ambassador slurred.

He must have mistaken the look of revelation on my face for one of disbelief, for he spent the better part of an hour trying to convince me it was true. Then he spent the better part of the evening swearing me to secrecy.

I suppose the average man would have been horrified to discover the Telosians were not perfect, but I found it strangely comforting. Perhaps it was soothing to think that not only humanity had been singled out to possess such an array of frailties. The galaxy was filled with life, and everywhere there was to be found a chorus of gaffes, blunders, and boo-boos. We were not alone in our stupidity, and somehow our own planet seemed a better place because of it.

And so I stayed on at the embassy, long after most of the Nobel laureates and the distinguished men of science and letters had returned to their own lives. I became the Telosians' closest interpreter of human affairs (much

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to the dismay of my superiors, who found me painfully informal in my demeanor), and settled into a comfortable routine that was neither taxing nor stressful. In fact, the only drawback was Tuesday, which was always garbage day.

The ritual was a remainder from the days of euphoria, when everyone on the planet had wanted to be closer to the magic of the outworlders. The ambassador himself had come up with the idea one afternoon as he watched a dumpsterful of mail being carted away.

"What's that?" he had asked, leaning far enough over a balcony to convince me that he needed a short briefing in the mechanics of Earthly gravity.

"Letters," I explained, pulling him back in from his precarious angle. "Telegrams, home-baked cookies, hand-knit sweaters and anything else someone could manage to get into the mail."

"But what is it for?" the ambassador persisted. "And why are you taking it all away?"

"People want to communicate with you in some way," I shrugged. "Average people, from faraway places, who will never see you in person. Most of it is garbage, Ambassador. If we didn't haul it away every week, the embassy would soon be filled with the stuff."

"But you mustn't," he protested, leaning farther than ever over the railing and waving a slender, branch-like arm. "We shall keep it all, and I shall have it sent in special containers to my own superiors, where *they* will have to dispose of it." Then he made a sound that served in a pinch as Telosian laughter, and I suddenly understood.

Revenge can be sweet no matter what color blood runs in your veins.

My superiors had not been pleased with the idea, but I convinced them that the Telosians considered the outpouring of mail a perfect way to learn more about the human psyche. The one caveat was that every piece of mail was to be screened first to remove anything that might be offensive to the outworlders, or embarrassing to ourselves. That was to be *my* responsibility, and it quickly made Tuesdays my least favorite day of the week.

I helped ease my own burden by hiring a crew of grad students from NYU to help with the screening. I gave them a specific list of contraband: all hate mail (which seemed to come primarily from religious fanatics who feared the outworlders were part of a plot to ban Christmas), all offers to invest in Florida beachfront property (of which there was a steady stream), all nude Polaroids (of which there were an incredible number from bored housewives everywhere), all baked goods (which the ambassador invariably ate and then invariably threw up), and finally anything that smacked of the seamier side of human life.

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It was a Tuesday in early spring when Matheson, my senior grad assistant, brought me something out of the ordinary that seemed to fall into this last category.

"What about this, Dr. Beyer?" he asked, holding out the crumpled newspaper for my inspection. "It isn't exactly contraband, but. . . ."

It took me a few seconds to see the *Daily Racing Form* emblazoned in red block letters across the front page, and I blinked as if I'd just encountered an old friend on a crowded street. I had spent an enlightening summer at Aqueduct Race Track during my undergraduate days, learning the hard way that betting the horses wasn't my calling in life. (I had thought that after cashing in on a $250 exacta, it just might be.) It had been years since I'd even held a copy of the *Racing Form,* but the lure of all those columns of numbers — arrayed neatly beneath names like Flim-Flam, Bimbo's Delight, and Beltway Bandito — called out to me in the primal language of greed and easy money.

"I'll take this," I said finally. "And any others that come in."

And it would have ended there had the ambassador not barged into my office at lunchtime already sloshing with the afternoon's quota of Miller Lite.

"What's that?" he asked politely as a pair of thin fingers plucked the *Racing Form* from my hands.

"Uh . . .well," I responded aggressively and the battle was lost. If there's one creature in this galaxy more stubbornly curious than a two-year-old human child, it's a Telosian ambassador on a small planet with time on his hands.

"This appears very interesting," the ambassador continued as he settled into the huge chair across from my desk. "These columns of numbers must have some significance." He looked at me over the top of the *Racing Form,* the heavy lids on his widely spaced eyes quivering in anticipation.

"Yes, Ambassador," I said in resignation, and I could hear my superiors lecturing me even as I answered. *The* Daily Racing Form, *Beyer! There was nothing more enlightening you could have discussed on this day than the betting of horses!* But what came out was: "The numbers represent the past performances of horses in races."

"Horse," the ambassador repeated, pulling his translator from the loose-fitting cloak that draped his angular form. He punched in the word, and I watched his eyebrows dance at the answer the device returned.

"But what is the purpose?" he asked at last as he let an empty six-pack of beer clatter to the floor. 'Is there some political significance to the outcome to these races?"

"Not unless the mayor of New York drops a bundle," I answered. "But generally, no, Ambassador. You see, people wager on the outcome of the races. They bet money."

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I waited again as "bet" and "wager" disappeared into the translater.

"Fascinating," the ambassador mumbled, and I could tell he was warming to the subject. He ingested the next six-pack without removing the pull tabs. There followed the crunch of aluminum as the Telosian teeth punctured the cans, and I sat patiently as he quickly scanned the pages of numbers.

"But tell me, Jonathan," he stirred finally, spitting the emptied six-pack against the wall to my left. "With all of these data available for each race, where is the challenge? Does not everyone win?"

"Hardly, Ambassador. You see, for starters, the betting is done via a parimutuel wagering system." The Telosian had started to punch the string of words into the translator when I leaned across the desk and slapped at the gristled fingers. "Let me handle this one, Ambassador. The 'pari-' comes from Paris, a city in France where the system was first devised by a French businessman many years ago. The 'mutuel' comes from the fact that everyone betting is putting his wager against the wagers of the other bettors. It's the people watching the race who actually determine the odds on each horse in a race."

"But even so," the ambassador said after a moment's consideration. "If the numbers in this document are accurate, would not analysis produce the correct result?"

"Occasionally," I mused, suddenly remembering a mortal lock in the fifth at Aqueduct that nearly cost me a a year's tuition. "But a horse race is a complicated, dynamic event. You have to consider the mechanics of ten or twelve large animals jostling for position, the mental errors of the riders, the possibility of mishaps. And once you add it all up, the problem becomes . . . well, inscrutable."

"Inscrutable...." the ambassador repeated as he began to work the translator.

"Unsolvable," I added quickly. "Unbeatable. I suppose that's why they call it the Sport of Kings."

"Sport of Kings." the Telosian echoed in awe. He passed some seconds in silence, idly toying with another six-pack before he asked, "Tell me, Jonathan. Would they allow us to witness such a race? We are not kings, of course, but perhaps. . ."

"Wait, Ambassador," I held up an open hand. "In the first place, you don't have to be royalty to go to the races. That's just an expression. And in the second place, my boss would run me through a Veg-a-matic if I took you to a racetrack."

I watched as the ambassador began to punch "Veg-a-matic" into the translator.

"I would be reprimanded, Ambassador. Probably right into unemployment."

"Hrumph," the ambassador said, though I wasn't sure if it was a Telosian

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word or the afterburst of twelve cans of beer.

"I would never do anything to jeopardize your position, Jonathan," the ambassador said finally.

He didn't have to go any farther. The unspoken "but" is the same anywhere in the galaxy.

"I'll do what I can, Ambassador," I sighed. "But we'll have to resort to subterfuge in this one. Perhaps I can arrange a trip to a manufacturing plant across the river, and perhaps we could get lost on the way. . ."

And so it was that on a beautiful day in spring, the ambassador's private shuttle was settling majestically onto the parking lot of Aqueduct Race Track. Had the gleaming machine touched down unannounced most anywhere else on the planet, there would have been at least a mild commotion. But here there was only the griping of the valet parking attendants — who insisted on payment, even though they couldn't have maneuvered Telosian craft across the lot for all the money in the world.

I was not comfortable. I became less comfortable when the ambassador discovered that beer was dispensed in large plastic cups that wouldn't require puncturing. Still and all, we made our entrance with little fanfare. (Waiting until the middle of the daily double helped with that.) The ambassador had spent the night in study of the *Racing Form,* and he was well versed on the day's offerings long before we reached the rail in the grandstand.

Perhaps his utter fascination should have sparked some warning for me, some faint inkling of things to come. And it would be a mark of my own intellect to say that, yes, even during those first moments at the track, I knew there was going to be Big Trouble. It would be nice, but also a lie. For even at the end, I had to be dragged kicking and screaming from my own stupidity.

But there on the rail, with the sun shining and the horses parading from the paddock and the fans shouting prayers and curses at the jockeys, I was happily ignorant.

The second race that afternoon was a routine event, matching a dozen horses of middle-level skills that were fairly evenly matched. The tote board reflected that fact, for even a minute before post time, the crowd couldn't decide among four different horses and chose a favorite. The ambassador was watching the flickering numbers on the board, too preoccupied to notice that he'd just bounced an empty beer cup off the head of a nearby patron. The man looked angry for a moment, but then decided against picking a fight with a twelve-foot adversary.

I merely shrugged and studied my own program.

"So who do you like?" I asked casually.

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"This horse," the ambassador pronounced with pride as he pointed to a program obscured by integral calculus.

"Hammy & Lammy," I read off the program, not resisting the chance to chuckle at the efforts of an amateur. "Ambassador, that horse would finish last in a race with my grandmother, and she *hates* horses. It's not even one of the favorites."

But the Telosian seemed unmoved by the logic of the tote board. We watched as the horses paraded by the grandstand for the last time on the way to the starting gate, and I was certain I detected a faint limp as Hammy & Lammy pranced past. I chuckled again, and even managed to maintain some remnants of my humor as Hammy & Lammy dashed home a winner by ten lengths.

"You see," the ambassador said. "A simple quadruple integral over limits defined by two converging series. Now the next race is somewhat more subtle. . . ."

I wasn't listening anymore. Instead, I was watching as Hammy & Lammy paid sixty-four dollars on a two-dollar wager.

"All right," I said. "The next one we bet. Who do you like?"

And so we passed a marvelous afternoon. The ambassador picked all the remaining winners, the late daily double, four exactas, and the triple in the ninth. He even predicted a fall on the backstretch by a horse in the tenth, and for some time I was indignant that wagering on falls had not been considered by the racing commission.

I turned twenty dollars and change into six months' salary, and I wasn't even annoyed when it required the help of eight ushers to carry the sloshing ambassador back to the shuttle. All in all, I was quite prepared to call it a successful experiment, and I would have, too. But. . . .

I had rather hoped that one afternoon at the track would satisfy the ambassador's curiosity, but I was forgetting an old Telosian proverb:

A star never novas when you're due at the dentist.

Within a week the embassy had become a storehouse for *Daily Racing Forms*. There were subscriptions to every edition that was published in the continental United States; there were tout sheets for all the major tracks; there were even ten years of back issues recorded on microfilm. (These came accompanied with a microfilm reader that had an uncanny penchant for snapping shut on long Telosian fingers.)

I began to spend a major portion of my days bundling stacks of *Racing Forms* into closets in the hopes that none of the visiting dignitaries would notice this newfound obsession. But the avalanche of newspapers wasn't the most disquieting development. That honor was reserved for the arrival of a new Telosian to the ambassador's staff.

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Now I'm not a snob. In fact, I liked to pride myself on being totally acclimated to the appearance of the outworlders. Yet if it was possible for a creature whose normal guise included brown latex skin and the distinctive odor of rotting cabbage to look sleazy, this new Telosian was the epitome of the word.

The ambassador introduced him as a distant relation who was interested in doing research on the cultures of developing planets. I was immediately reminded of my own brother-in-law, and wondered if used-car salesmen had some sort of gigantic brotherhood.

And there was one last development that should have been the most ominous. The entire embassy had always been open to me, including the ambassador's rubble-strewn living quarters. Yet now, for the first time, a room was placed off-limits. It had been nothing more than a storeroom on the top floor of the embassy where the ambassador had kept his collection of beer cans. When I pressed for an explanation, the ambassador got uncomfortable and caught several fingers in the microfilm reader.

"Come now, Jonathan," he said as he tried to extricate his appendage from the machine. "Every embassy must have a place to store its secrets."

"But you don't have any secrets," I countered as I joined in the struggle to free his hand.

"But what if we should *get* some?" the ambassador answered, suddenly pulling free from the reader and sending us both to the floor.

I let it go at that, but already my instincts were bristling with a premonition of disaster. Unfortunately for me, my instincts also bristle every time I go out on a date or have my car repaired. What with all this bristling going on, I tend to wait until my instincts are verified with facts. At least this time I wouldn't have long to wait.

Barely four weeks to the day after our expedition to Aqueduct *they* appeared at the embassy. They were colonels, I think, though I'm not sure I got an accurate count of the gold stripes. Why one colonel was not considered sufficient, I don't know. But they stood very stiffly in my office, showing no regrets for interrupting my turkey sandwich as they explained that we were going on a trip. To Washington, D.C. To meet with the president of the United States.

It was not my normal lunch.

An hour later I was winging my way south on a military jet, my two colonels safely in tow. We were met at Andrews Air Force Base by two additional colonels (presumably there to keep an eye on the *first* colonels), and then the five of us set off for the White House.

We breezed through the wrought-iron gates and past all the security checkpoints, and I quickly found myself in a very large and very dim conference room. Of the twenty or so

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men present, I was the only one whose sleeves were unadorned by eagles or hammers or stars or stripes or braid, and I immediately regretted never having joined the National Rifle Association. (Never having fired a gun was something of an obstacle.)

I was given a prominent seat at one end of the table, and then the president himself entered and took a hurried seat at the opposite end of the long conference table.

"Thank you for coming, Dr. Beyer," the president said warmly, as if no one had informed him of the role played by the contingent of colonels. "We need to ask you some questions about the ambassador. I'm told that you have become something of a confidant to the Telosian. Is this true?"

"Well, sir" — I squirmed under the gaze of all those present — "I suppose you could say that."

"Good," the president nodded. "And I'm sure we can trust your discretion in keeping this conversation to yourself?"

I couldn't quite see the president's face in the dim light, but I'm certain his eyebrows had arched as he awaited my response.

"Of course, sir."

"Good," he nodded again. "What we need to know, Dr. Beyer, is whether or not you've noticed anything unusual at the embassy during the past month or so. Anything out of the ordinary."

I gulped. Why a collection of twenty generals would be so interested in the ambassador's affection for horse racing, I couldn't have guessed. But they were, and now I had to answer for it. Faced with an impossible situation where my adversaries held all the cards, I took the only rational alternative.

I lied.

"Not really, sir," I said with a convincing purse of the lips. "I mean, if you could be more specific. . . ."

"Dr. Beyer," said the general sitting to the president's left. His tone managed to transform my name into a unspoken threat. "During the past four weeks, the Telosians have placed half a dozen satellites in stationary Earth orbit. Their obvious purpose is to monitor specific activities on the surface, and we are very concerned as to the ultimate purpose of this surveillance."

I gulped again, and then the president spoke up.

"Please don't get the wrong idea, Dr. Beyer," he said with a crocodile smile. "We certainly don't think you've been withholding information on Telosian activities, at least not intentionally. And we are not accusing the outworlders of engaging in subterfuge. Yet the general has spoken the truth. These satellites can have only one purpose, and we are concerned as to the eventual use of this information. You must understand."

I was just beginning to understand as images of the secret room and the ambassador's disreputable relative

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came crashing into my head. When I returned from my private analyses, a room full of suspicious eyes were watching me closely. I cleared my throat and pretended to find my shoes fascinating, and finally the president ended the suspense.

"Well," he said with the air of a second-grade teacher. "I'm certain that Dr. Beyer will be keeping his eyes open from now on. You will be given a name to contact with any information you might discover, Dr. Beyer. Please use it as soon as possible."

Then he rose and hurried out of the room, followed by the entire gathering of generals. I was escorted efficiently back to the airport, and was redeposited at the embassy by three in the afternoon, where I found my half-eaten sandwich waiting patiently. The trip to Washington had impressed me with the seriousness of the situation, and as I finished my interrupted lunch, I began to formulate a plan. . . .

The first step was to get myself into the secret room on the top floor of the embassy. I envisioned the most difficulty with this task, since I expected to find my way blocked by whatever advanced technology the Telosians could bring to bear on the subject of security. I enlisted the aid of Matheson, since I remembered that he'd done some undergraduate work in physics, and I suspected that would come in handy if we had to deal with force fields and the like.

"Work fast," I instructed him late on a Friday afternoon. "I've arranged to have several large pizzas delivered promptly at five o'clock. That should keep the ambassador and his friend occupied for fifteen minutes or so. But I won't be able to keep them in the dining hall without arousing suspicion."

"Don't worry, Dr. Beyer," Matheson nodded gravely. "I've got all my test equipment ready." He pulled me into his cubicle and pointed to a stack of electronics that stood as tall as a man.

"Matheson," I said with a sigh. "It would take *both* of us an hour just to get all this stuff upstairs. Why don't you just look around on this trip, O.K.?"

"But. . . ."

"No buts," I warned. "Remember, the president of the United States is counting on us. Now wait here until I give you the sign. Then work *fast.*"

Work extremely fast, was what I was praying a few minutes later as I watched the Telosians savage half a dozen pepperoni pizzas.

"Come, Jonathan," the ambassador insisted with a spray of tomato sauce. "This was an excellent idea. Why don't you join us?"

"Thank you, Ambassador," I demured. "But I'm watching my weight." I tapped my stomach for emphasis. The two outworlders were devouring the last of the empty boxes and draining the last of the beer when Matheson stuck his head in the doorway of the

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dining hall and gave me a nod.

"It's hopeless, isn't it?" I asked a few minutes later as we hurried back to my office. "Could you even get close?"

"What are you talking about, Dr. Beyer?" Matheson answered as he dropped casually into a chair. "I was in there, took a look around, and made my escape. Piece of cake."

"But how . . .?" I started to ask, when he held up an open hand to display a simple mechanical padlock.

"This was all they used?" I asked, incredulous.

"Not quite," Matheson said. "It was on the door, but they forgot to lock it."

"So much for advanced technology," I muttered. "Now what did you find in there?"

"Nothing too fancy," Matheson answered. "It looks like a simple data-relay station. I would guess they're taking a feed off that collection of satellites you told me about, and then sending a master signal up to the mother ship. Where it goes from there is anybody's guess."

"Data relay," I repeated to myself, but the last pieces of the puzzle were already falling into place.

The second phase of the plan was simpler: I merely had to wait until the ambassador was passing through the final zone of coherency on his way to an alcoholic stupor. For this I would need the aid of the Metropolitan Opera.

Now I've never been a fan of the opera myself. The attraction of listening to overweight men sing in a foreign language of their love for overweight women is somehow lost on me. Yet the ambassador was hooked the very first time he heard the opera on the radio.

The ritual for Saturday afternoons was always the same: the Met on the radio, two cases of chilled Chianti on the floor, and several trays of baked lasagna for appetizers. The choice of the Met on this particular Saturday was *Carmen,* and I listened to most of the opening act without hearing the music. I was biding my time, and somewhere between the lasagna and the second case of Chianti, I would make my move.

"Extraordinary," the ambassador was saying, though there were times I wasn't certain he understood the difference between the opera and the commercials.

"Yes," I said as I studied the large Telosian face for the telltale signs of drunkenness. "Yes, it is good today. But I can't help but feel that something's bothering you, Ambassador. Is anything wrong?"

"Wrong?" The ambassador struggled to right himself in his chair. "Whatever do you mean, Jonathan?"

"You just seem preoccupied, Ambassador," I probed gently. "Perhaps it's a problem with the satellite network. Are you certain that your associate can handle it all himself?"

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"He is sometimes incompetent...." He trailed off into a Telosian garble, and I could almost feel the large, red-rimmed eyes boring into my head.

"Jonathan," he scolded slowly. "You've been *spying*."

"No," I corrected. "I've been stupid. There's a difference. But what I want to know is how long you intend to keep it up."

"Keep what up?" the ambassador returned uneasily as a bottle of Chianti disappeared into his mouth.

"No more games, Ambassador." I shook my head firmly and shut off the radio. "I know what's going on here. The satellites, the communications room upstairs, *Racing Forms* filling the hallways. I know what it's called."

"What's it called?" the ambassador stalled, balancing the empty bottle on his massive lower lip.

"You're a bookie, Ambassador." I let my fingers tap ominously on the arm of the chair. "A galactic bookie, perhaps. But still a bookie."

"Bookie?" The ambassador frowned and pulled the translator from his cloak.

"Bookie," I repeated firmly. "You take bets on horse races. What I want to know is from whom."

"Bookie," the ambassador echoed as the translator returned the definition. The bottle slipped from its perch on his lip, finding its way to the floor with a splintering crash. "Yes, well, Jonathan. I suppose I should have told you from the start. And *I* wanted to tell you. My *yrella,* however, did not. He felt you would attempt to interfere. I told him—"

"Hold it," I interrupted. "Give me the translator."

The ambassador watched as I punched *"yrella"* into the device, waiting in silence as it flickered and then spelled out "brother-in-law."

"All right," I said without surprise. "Why did it have to be horse racing? Surely there are a thousand things in this universe more interesting to bet than animals from my home planet."

"But you're wrong, Jonathan," the ambassador answered quickly. "I knew that this was something special when you first described it to me. And the more I learned, the more convinced I became. The racing of horses is the perfect blend of the predictable and the unpredictable, the obvious and the subtle, the logical and the illogical. Without knowing, you humans have discovered the ultimate device in wagering. An event that can defy the most powerful analysis, yet still leave the impression that all its facets are ruled by discernable laws."

"So what you're saying is that—"

"The whole galaxy is betting on your horses, Jonathan." The Telosian leaned back in his chair with a satisified burp. "Images of these races are broadcast to a hundred worlds. The system is young, but already we are taking ten thousand bets a second on the more popular races. We have put your planet on the map, Jonathan

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You should be honored."

But somehow I wasn't honored. I didn't like to think of the entries in encyclopedias across the galaxy.

> Earth:-*a small planet on the outer fringes of the second axial arm. Known for the invention of the frisbee and the breeding of racing animals called horses. . . .*

"All right, Ambassador." I paced slowly across the room. "I suppose there's nothing I can say to make you abandon your career as a bookie. But couldn't you just build a racetrack on some nice, faraway planet and watch those races? Why does it have to be on the same planet where *I'm* trying to make a living?"

"Because this is the original, Jonathan." The ambassador was suddenly emphatic. "The real thing."

"Great," I said, but I wasn't convinced. "Listen to me, Ambassador. You have to do this for me, at least. Those observation satellites of yours are making our military people very nervous. I think they're afraid you're thinking about an invasion or something."

"But that's absurd, Jonathan." The Telosian rolled onto his stomach to watch my nervous pacing. "No outworlder would accept the stigma of actually coming here. I came only because—"

"Don't tell me the details," I said quickly, feeling the first pangs of a headache. "I don't think I want to know. Just move your satellites, and don't tell me anything more about this unless the whole damned galaxy hangs in the balance. Understand?"

Then I went home, took half a dozen aspirin, and spent the night with dreams of racetracks on the moon.

The two weeks following were peaceful, and I had almost convinced myself that the worst was over. The Telosians moved their satellites, the president and his generals seemed relieved, and I hadn't been fired. All in all, I couldn't complain.

Yet when the ambassador appeared in the doorway of my office one afternoon, I knew I was in trouble. Perhaps it was my growing sensitivity for Telosian body language, or some form of interspecies telepathy, or maybe even the twin six-packs of beer the ambassador had slung across his hips like six-shooters from the Old West.

"Jonathan," the ambassador began slowly. "Do you remember what you said before about when I should talk to you?"

I merely shook my head, afraid to speak as I watched the first of the six-packs disappear.

"You said I shouldn't talk to you again about the horse racing unless the whole galaxy hung in the balance."

"It was just a figure of speech," I said, trying to laugh. "An intentional exaggeration."

The translator appeared from be-

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neath the ambassador's cloak, and he busily entered "exaggeration."

"I wasn't being literal," I said, getting very edgy as the second six-pack followed the first down the Telosian gullet.

"Oh, " the ambasador frowned."I thought you were being prophetic."

"Don't tell me," I groaned, and to my amazement the ambassador turned and started to leave.

"Where are you going?" I nearly shouted. "You don't just walk into a man's office, casually remark that the entire galaxy is hanging in the balance, and then leave."

"But you said—"

"Forget what I said!" I made myself count to ten while the ambassador cringed in the doorway. "Now tell me whether or not I should worry about next month's rent . . . ."

This time the trip to Washington went more smoothly. I don't know if they were all the same colonels from the first time, but they did seem to apppreciate my knowledge of the routine. Once again I was seated at the head of the long conference table, and again found myself the recipient of a roomful of expectant stares.

"Well," I began with a smile. "I suppose you're all wondering why I called you here today."

I had always wanted to say that.

"Dr. Beyer," the president said, interrupting the total silence around me. "We are not here for levity. The message you gave Colonel Hawthorne indicated we had a serious problem that required top-level attention. Is that true?"

"Yes, sir," I coughed. "It's just a little difficult to get rolling, sir. It's a rather unusual problem, you see."

"We can't see unless you tell us, Dr. Beyer." The president was not smiling.

"Yes, sir." I took a deep breath, trying to pretend I had nothing more difficult to do than take a dive off the high board. "We need to fix the Kentucky Derby, Mr. President."

It was only in the ensuing roar that I remembered the week in the hospital that had followed my first plunge off the high board.

It took the better part of the night to explain the intricacies of parimutuel wagering on a galactic scale, and how some poorer cultures had developed a scheme to speed their transition to planetary wealth by making massive wagers on the horse races of Earth. I did my best to gloss over the ambassador's unfortunate role as instigator in the whole affair, and I think that by the time I finally finished my discourse, no one cared.

The president sat staring at his open hands, looking for all the world as if the Democrats had just won California in the election. The rows of generals shuffled nervously in the semi-darkness, and no one seemed willing to risk another question.

"Well, that's the story, Mr. Presi-

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dent," I said. "According to the ambassador, the only way to avoid a galactic war is for a certain horse to win the Kentucky Derby next Saturday. But not only must the race be fixed, it has to look honest, or we'll do more harm than good."

"Which horse?" the president asked very quietly.

"That's the tricky part, sir." I hesitated, but decided that no one in the room would actually be carrying a gun. "We won't know until sixty seconds before post time."

"Sixty seconds. . . ." the president repeated with the tone of a doomed man.

Now I had never seen a president cry, though once I saw my father's eyes mist over when my mother told him she'd driven our car into Lake Michigan. But it's different with a president, and I hope I never see it again. There followed a great deal of commotion, with people scurrying in and out of the conference room, and I was reminded of an old quotation that chose that moment to exit from an unmarked closet in my mind.

The government of a nation is often decided over a cup of coffee, or the fate of empires changed by an extra bottle of wine. . . .

I sat patiently as I watched the unending activity around me, suddenly glad I had decided to wait another week before paying my rent.

Derby Day dawned clear and blue in Kentucky, offering the sweet smell of spring to the thousands filing into Churchill Downs. I watched the swelling crowd from a commandeered press box on the top of the grandstands, quietly deciding that I no longer cared whether or not the galaxy would be at war by the end of the afternoon. I merely wanted to sleep.

The week had been an endless series of meetings as the technocrats attacked the problem of fixing a horse race in plain view of a hundred worlds. The first approaches to the problem were as comprehensive as a mission to the moon, and would have required the knowledge and cooperation of everyone on the planet save for a few suburbs of Cleveland.

"This is crazy," I pronounced one midnight as I listened to a presentation on filling the grandstands of Churchill Downs with Hollywood extras. "To make the race *look* real, you've got to let it *be* real."

"Then how do we make sure the proper horse wins?" asked one of the shirt-sleeved analysts.

"Let the jockeys do it," I answered simply.

The silence that followed was almost profound.

And so the mechanics of actually fixing the race had been placed in the capable hands of Juan Ortega de Cinebar, most renowned jockey in the sport, who by chance was also riding the expected favorite in the field of twenty.

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De Cinebar had not actually been difficult to approach in the matter.

"You're fourth in line on the fix," he had told the FBI operative who'd made first contact. "Right after the Cosa Nostra, a Venezuelen business cartel, and some television preacher from down South. This race is gonna be so crooked it's straight."

He was, however, pursuaded to move us first in line on the fix list. The other jockeys in the race were similarly pursuaded, and even made willing participants when informed they would be paid one million each, tax-free, for their cooperation and future silence.

The mechanics of the operation would be relatively simple. As soon as the ambassador had crunched the numbers from his betting computers, he would relay the number of the chosen horse to me in the grandstrand. I would, in turn, relay the number of the horse down to the track, where a CIA operative disguised as an exercise rider would pass the word to all the jockeys. After that, it was up to them.

I spent the hours during the preliminary races scanning the *Racing Form,* and by the time the horses for the Derby itself were coming onto the track, I knew which one couldn't possibly have won even a fixed race.

"Please," I said as I watched the president gulp his fourth mint julep. "Don't let it be Jan's Delight."

"What?" the president asked, picking a mint leaf from his mouth.

"Nothing, sir," I said, pulling my binoculars out to watch the post parade. Each of the expensive animals seemed to gleam under the bright Kentucky sunshine, prancing as they snorted in anticipation of the ritual that served as the center of their lives. All, that is, except for Jan's Delight.

"What's wrong with that one?" the president asked innocently, following my gaze to where one of the horses was fighting with a fan at the rail for possession of a box of popcorn.

I didn't have the heart to answer as Jan's Delight pulled away with its prize, and returned to the post parade with the box firmly clamped over its snout. My attention remained fixed, even as I heard the phone ringing behind me, and I watched as the stallion displayed its affection, and its endowment, for the benefit of a homely walking pony.

"This is it," said the general who had picked up the phone."Dr. Beyer, I have the embassy on the line. Our boy is number twenty, do you roger? Number twenty."

"Yes," I nodded as I dropped my binoculars. There was no need to check the program. The fate of the civilized galaxy would ride with Jan's Delight.

The next three minutes of my life are recorded as a blur. I can relay only

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those perceptions that filtered through my fatigue and the protective glaze of mint juleps, but they are enough to make me shudder.

The signs were ominous from the start: Jan's Delight refused to enter the starting gate any way but backward. It took the efforts of ten grooms to change his mind. And then, after fighting hoof and tail to stay out of the gate, the horse wouldn't leave. Even when the race started.

"Where's twenty?" the president shouted excitedly, swinging his binoculars up the track with the pack of horses already sprinting from the gate.

"There," I answered with fading hopes as Jan's Delight broke reluctantly into the light of day.

But while I had already thrown in the towel, Juan Ortega de Cinebar remained a consummate professional. He rose in his stirrups as he took Sir Lancelot into the lead on the first turn, quickly assessing the situation. Jan's Delight was plodding along contentedly a hundred yards behind the pack. And if he wouldn't keep pace with the rest of the field, they would have to keep pace with him. De Cinebar reined back on Sir Lancelot, beginning a chain reaction that rippled back through the field of nineteen horses.

Yet I must give some credit to Jan's Delight. This was obviously a horse that had its sights on finishing last, and it was driven by some equine obsession to do just that, regardless of the help being offered. The more de Cinebar slowed the pace of the leaders, the more recalcitrant Jan's Delight became to the urgings of his jockey. It was becoming a warped rewrite of the tortoise and the hare. I did some quick mental calculations, and decided that at their present rate of deceleration, the entire race would grind to a stop somewhere on the backstretch.

"I can't watch," the president sighed, dropping the binoculars from his eyes. "Tell me when it's over."

"That might take awhile," I mused quietly as Sir Lancelot finally trotted into the backstretch.

Once again, however, I had underestimated the resourcefulness of de Cinebar and his fellows. Just as I decided that Jan's Delight would need cab fare to catch the pack, a cloud of sod and hooves and riders blossomed in the midst of the leaders. The crowd emitted a collective gasp as five horses tumbled to the track, forcing the entire field to take a detour to the outer rail. When the dust had settled, our chosen steed was now a mere twenty-five yards behind the leaders. I saw de Cinebar rise up in the stirrups again, surveying the scene behind him like a general.

I felt the first twinges of hope as Jan's Delight passed Regal Splendor, who was valiantly fighting the urgings of its jockey to go slow. We were no longer last.

But last was not first, and de Cine-

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bar knew that this was going to require the blowing of *all* ballast. I watched through my binoculars as he took Sir Lancelot into the far turn, waited for Night Ranger to pull alongside, and then whacked the opposing jockey across the head with his whip.

That must have been a signal, for fouls sprouted throughout the pack like dandelions. Whips were branished, reins were yanked, racing silks were torn from riders and tossed high in the air, horses were driven like bumper cars into other horses. The pack turned down into the homestretch looking like a horde of Mongol horsemen engaged in warfare on the open steppes of Asia. And through it all, Jan's Delight jogged contently behind the carnage of the pack.

De Cinebar's final strategy was now obvious: If you can't lose, get yourself disqualified.

The melee of horses and riders had broken into several knots as they approached the finish line. In one group two of the jockeys engaged in a wrestling match, pulling themselves from the saddles as their mounts raced home unencumbered. In another, a duel of riding crops summoned images of D'Artagnan and his fellow musketeers. I scanned the field, contenting myself that every remaining horse seemed to be involved in at least three major fouls. Then I held my breath as Jan's Delight pranced home in twelfth place behind the carnage.

De Cinebar and his cohorts played their parts to the end, engaging in fistfights and shouting matches even as they unsaddled in front of the grandstand. The inquiry light flashed on the tote board immediately, and I settled back for a long wait.

Somewhere out on the jammed infield, a band played "My Old Kentucky Home" over and over until a group of drunken bystanders rebelled and confiscated their instruments. The mint juleps flowed more freely than ever, and the racing stewards reviewed the tapes of the race many times before the tote board went blank in preparation for the posting of their decision.

I was nervous, of course, but still strangely confident. Perhaps I'd been living on the edge of insanity too long. But somehow I was certain that no matter how many times the films were rerun, only one horse on the race would emerge clear of any fouls. Jan's Delight would win the Derby, albeit with the slowest final time ever recorded in an organized thoroughbred race. Juan Ortega de Cinebar and eighteen of his fellow jockeys would be suspended from racing for one year, but none would ever complain too loudly. And I would return to New York with the knowledge I would now get my money's worth for the next month's rent.

The ambassador was properly grateful for having been extricated from his predictment. The communi-

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cations room on the top floor was dismantled, and he swore solemnly on a stack of *TV Guides* that he would never again broadcast Earthly horse races to the rest of the galaxy. He reserved the right to make occasional wagers for himself, however, and from then on a sunglassed character named One-Eyed Sammy would drop by the embassy every morning at ten o'clock sharp to collect the bets.

I considered this the lesser of the possible evils, even if the ambassador developed the habit of borrowing ten dollars every morning at a quarter to ten.

And as for Tuesdays, they remained garbage day. Yet now I took an almost fanatical interest in what came in the mail, for I realized that I had been given the enormous task of protecting the rest of the galaxy from the vices of humanity. And while I wasn't sure the rest of the galaxy stood much of a chance in the long run, I was going to give it my best shot.

I did, too, until one Tuesday when I was out with the flu. Matheson thought they were nothing but harmless paperweights, and passed them on to the ambassador. And the ambassador was still rolling them around in his huge, leathery hands the following morning, grinning as I stepped into my office.

"Dice," was all he needed to say, and I knew it was going to be a long day.

But that's another story. . . .

Coming soon

Next month: A compelling new novelet by **Lucius Shepard** titled A SPANISH LESSON, an unusual Christmas story by **Richard Cowper**, plus new stories from **Jane Yolen, George Alec Effinger** and others.

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Installment 13: *In Which Numerous Ends (Loose) Are Tied Up; Some In The Configuration Of A Noose (Hangman's)*

As I write this, another film murder is in progress.

I leave for London and Scotland tomorrow (5 July), and this column is my final chore in front of the typewriter. When these words get to your eyes, I'll have returned to Los Angeles; I'll have sat in William Friedkin's back pocket as he directed my teleplay adaptation of Stephen King's "Gramma" for *The Twilight Zone*; I'll have voyaged far to Australia Incognita and will have returned with or without a Hugo for non-fiction; I'll have watched with pleasure the Friday-night-in-September premiere of CBS-TV's revival of TZ ... and the murder will be merely another footnote in the history of the cinema.

Much will have happened between this writing and your reading of what I'm about to set down.

And were it not that your faithful hawkshaw got the wind up, this killing of a movie — like the crib-death of *Dune*, about which I wrote two columns recently — would be yet another perfect crime. Nor would you be apprised of how willingly you were accomplices.

Much of life will have transpired and in the impression of humanity's footsteps left behind, no one will notice, I fear, that another butterfly has

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been crushed underfoot. That's poetry.

Last time, I urged you to rush out and see RETURN TO OZ (Walt Disney Productions). I managed to slip that appeal into the column when the galleys were returned for proofing because I'd gotten the wind up, had begun to smell the *dēja vu* of what had befallen *Dune*, and I didn't want the murder to go unnoticed because of a delay in getting the word to you, resulting from this magazine's monthly publication schedule. I wanted you to catch this film before it vanished from your local theaters.

And it did vanish, didn't it? Quickly.

I have given you the date on which I'm typing these words, because the months between this date and your reading of the words have not yet passed. So what I write is, at this moment, prediction. As you read the words, it's history. If I smelled the charnel house smell, and am not merely a victim of paranoid conspiracy-theory, then you will know what I'm about to say has the ring of truth in it; otherwise how could I have predicted it?

If the events of the intervening months do not back up my assertions, then I'm dyin' cuz I'm lyin'.

I began to smell the odor of filmic crib-death even before *Return to Oz* opened; and I implored you to ignore the witless and intransigent negative reviews that were everywhere to be found; to treat yourselves to an afternoon or evening basking in the marvels of this wondrous fantasy while you could.

Because if my snoot was accurate, if you put off the going to see it, *Return to Oz* would be gone; and who knows how it'll play on videocassette or cable television a year from now?

In the trade, they call it "dumping."

I call it crib-death. Strangling the infant before it gets its legs through word-of-mouth. (In the trade, mixed metaphor works. In the trade, *everything* works, including executives who've been exposed as embezzlers, charlatans, wrong-guessers, idiots and knaves.)

If you followed the reasoning I put forth in the matter of *Dune's* early demise, you were no doubt left with one nagging question: *why* (if Ellison's correct that Universal sabotaged its own release) did a major film company program the catastrophic failure of a forty million dollar epic that should have made its year-end p&l sheets vibrate with profits?

I had the same question.

It was only recently that an Informed Source gave me the answer. (Informed, but also, necessarily, Unnamed. Bamboo slivers under the fingernails cannot drag the name from me. You'll just have to take my word for it that said Source exists, oh yes said Source do. Everybody in the trade talks, and many there be who will summon up the *cojones* to blow the whistle; but swift and ugly reprisal is

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a fact of life in the trade, and I see no reason why an act of honesty should result in someone's losing his/her livelihood. Rather would I have you consider what I say with skepticism.)

My Unnamed Source called to tell me that the budget on *Dune* was not, as I and every other American journalist reported, a mere forty million dollars. It was more than $75,000,000!

So unless *Dune* had been a runaway hit on the level of *Beverly Hills Cop* or *Rambo* there was absolutely *no way* Universal was going to come out on the black side of the ledger.

It was very likely going to be a loser, but it need not have been *such* a loser. Sabotage from within, it now seems obvious, was the final nail in *Dune's* coffin. But why? The answer lies in the power politics and job-hopping of studio executives.

When I expressed disbelief at such a berserk answer, my Informed Source chided me for naïveté. It is not, however, wide-eyed innocence on my part that forces me to express doubts. It is the canker on the rose called libel. In *Synopsis of the Law of Libel and the Right of Privacy*, by Bruce W. Sanford, a pamphlet for journalists published by Scripps-Howard Newspapers, among the words and phrases "red flagged" as containing potentially actionable potency, we find the following: altered records, blackguard, cheats, corruption, coward, crook, fraud, liar, moral delinquency, rascal, scam, sold out, unethical and villain. Also on the list are booze hound, deadbeat, fawning sycophant, groveling office seeker, herpes, Ku Klux Klan and unmarried mother. But those have nothing to do with the topic at hand. Just thought I'd get them in for a little cheap sensationalism.

So what I will report here is carefully written. Facts and some philosophy. The linkages are yours to make.

Success and failure in the film colony are adduced on the basis of one's most recent production. Even an inept booze hound or fawning sycophant affiliated with a hit movie glows with the golden radiance of its success. A set designer or actor who did a splendid job in connection with a flop gets tarred with the same brush as the fools who came a cropper. Take director Martin Brest, as an example. Marty's first film after creating the brilliant *Hot Tomorrows* while still in attendance at the American Film Institute, was *Going in Style* (1979), which did not do well. Marty could not get arrested (as it is warmly phrased in the trade) for three years. That's a long time to go without a job if you're a young director. Then he made *Beverly Hills Cop* in 1984. We all know how big that film hit. (Which was a fluke that Destiny had in its rucksack for Marty, who deserves all good breaks, for he is an enormously talented artist; a fluke in that Stallone was originally set to play the lead, backed out for whatever reasons, and was replaced by Eddie

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Murphy, who can do no wrong on-screen.)

But now, Martin Brest is the hottest director in Hollywood.

And everyone connected with the film at Paramount — including then-studio heads Michael Eisner and Barry Diller — got hot with him. So they moved over to Disney. But that gets relevant later in this essay.

The point being that executives hop from studio to studio on the basis of how good they looked when they left. And frequently that has more to do with what happens to a movie than how good or bad the film is intrinsically. So a fact of film industry life that you've never known till now is the truth that an exec wanting to look to his shareholders as one who saved a studio in decline, necessarily tries to make his/her predecessors look bad. The worse they look, the better he/she looks if/when the new exec presents a bountiful p&l sheet at year-end.

I present the preceding as philosophy only.

Here is a fact. In 1982, when Universal picked up *Dune* for distribution from Dino DeLaurentiis, the administration of that film mill was under the aegis of President Bob Rehme (now Pres./CEO of New World Pictures). But by 1984 when *Dune* was released, Rehme was gone and Frank Price (who had hopped over from Columbia) was President of Universal.

As I recounted in detail in installments 9 and 10 of this column, what happened to *Dune* bore all the earmarks of a classic "dumping" scenario. That's how it looked to those of us who write about the film industry, and the conclusion is borne out by my Unnamed Source. Change of administration, a disaster credited to Rehme, and the new Priests of the Black Tower can only move upward, appearancewise, even if the next p&l is only adequate.

The same is happening to *Return to Oz* as I write this.

The film is being orphaned by Disney's new management, the Eisner-Diller combine. That's how it looks to me.

The evidence is out there for you to integrate, if you look even casually: no television advertising to speak of; small newsprint ads; few positive quotes; the film yanked from movie houses after a short run. And only now, several weeks after its premiere, are talk-show interviews with principals from the film being booked. The film came in around $32 million. The studio cut out most of the publicity back in March, three months before *Return to Oz* was scheduled to open; and it had an opening week advertising budget of approximately $4-4.5 million. This is extremely low for a major release. A typical figure for a comparable film would be $7-10 million, aided by heavy saturation on the talk-show circuit. Those are facts; evidence.

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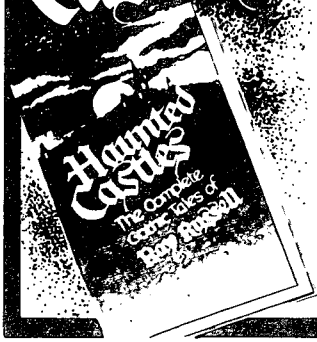

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But here's what was going on behind the scenes.

The old Disney marketing department was essentially in place from the start of production late in 1983, until early in 1985. Then the new studio management of Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg started playing a direct hand.

Barry Glasser, the Vice President of Publicity, was unhappy and left the studio in March for a production development position with a Japanese animation company, TMS.

Frequently, studios hire outside publicity and advertising agencies to work with the in-house marketing department. The new management of Disney hired Young & Rubicam in February or March of 1985. Gordon Weaver, a former head of Paramount's marketing division and head of Y&R Entertainment, was given charge of the *Return to Oz* account. Unlike most agency/studio relationships the agency started giving the orders to the studio personnel, leaving the marketing department in an unusual and untenable position. Barry Lorie, head of marketing for Disney, was so undercut by these goings-on that he was left with virtually little authority. It is common knowledge that Lorie bided his time, taking what was dished out, until an opportunity to hop presented itself. (It was announced during the last week in June that he would be leaving Disney due to "philosophical differences with the new management of the studio.")

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If one were to examine the facts, the evidence, and consider the *modus operandi* of dumping in the trade, one might feel that the situation as regards *Return to Oz* is philosophically consistent with historical precedent. I think that is a safe legal locution.

It is not enough to say, "Well, the critics hated the movie," because audiences seem to love it; and hideous films of virtually no value are hyped in huge measure to get the potential audience's appetite whetted. But nothing much was done for *Oz*, and now the new Disney administration can say, "Well, it isn't reaching the market we thought would welcome it. We have to cut our losses." Orphaned. Dumped. Murdered.

And as producer Gary Kurtz knows, and as he told Disney, it is important to remember that the 1939 *Wizard of Oz* was a boxoffice disaster, and remained so until it was purchased for television in the early 60's, from which time it has been regarded by the general public (not just us enthusiasts) as a "classic." But such need not have been the case with *Return to Oz*. It is a remarkable piece of moviemaking, true to the Baum canon, and worthy of being successful.

So we must ask the question, *how* did Eisner know *Return to Oz* wouldn't reach its audience back in February or March, long before it opened? Because that is when the advertising budget was cut and helter-skelter was introduced as the standard operating procedure. Unless he possesses a clairvoyance that ought to be scrutinized by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (3151 Bailey Avenue; Buffalo, New York 14215; publishers of *The Skeptical Inquirer*; an organization and a magazine you should support if you, as I, despise all the obscurantism and illogic from Creationism to Astrology that pollutes our world), one of the few rational explanations is that dumping has occurred.

If there is another rationale that can fit in with the evidence, this column is anxiously waiting to publish such an explanation. From Paramount. From Disney. From anyone who feels compelled to let us know that the world is not what our intellect tells us it is.

Until that time, it saddens me to have to advise those of you who went for the okeydoke that *Return to Oz* was a stinker, that you have been willing accomplices to the murder of a piece of cinematic delight.

And how does it make you feel to be one of those P.T. Barnum was referring to when he said . . . oh, shucks, you know.

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Richard Wilson has published numerous science fiction short stories, three novels, and, in 1968, received the Nebula Award for his novelette, "Mother to the World." As a change of pace, his latest work is a history book, The Critical Years, *a volume in the history of Syracuse University where he was Director of SU's News Bureau. "See Me Safely Home" is a lyrical ghost story that demonstrates, as Shakespeare wrote, that "Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds."*

See Me Safely Home

BY
RICHARD WILSON

The ghost of the young woman in Elizabethan dress first appeared to me in the library of the big house that so recently had belonged to my parents.

At first I thought it was my mother come back to the home she and my father had made for each other and where they lived happily for so many years. But there could be no reason for the ghost of my mother to wear a period costume. It might have been more appropriate for her to wear the short skirt and bobbed hair of the 1920's when she was, though no flapper, a liberated lady of her era.

The death of my parents in an automobile accident came at an ironic time. My wife and I had just been divorced after a property settlement that gave her our house and custody of our college-age children. There had been a bitter fight between our lawyers that seemed more acrimonious than any of the marital battles Helen and I had gone through over the years. We were living apart by then and had met by chance at the one supermarket in our suburban village. At the frozen food section, we talked about the field day our lawyers were having with *Horton* v. *Horton* — our case.

Helen and I continued the conversation over a drink and reached agreement on a couple of points the lawyers seemed disposed to haggle over forever. Helen dropped her demand for 50 percent of my future earnings, and I agreed to a lump-sum cash settlement in lieu of alimony and child support.

It was a rather generous settlement, but it didn't leave me strapped, just homeless. I had an independent income, settled on me by my grandparents when I had turned thirty.

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More important was the fact that I was beginning to hit my stride as a free-lance writer, with two suspense novels doing well and with offers of contracts for half a dozen more. My agent saw a possibility of vast amounts of money from the books, plus movie sales and maybe a play or TV series written around the hero of my stories.

I'd always provided for my family with income other than from writing, and Helen generously agreed that she need not share in what she called my trash cash. In turn I could be generous about the settlement. We had a second drink and parted to instruct our lawyers to work out the details and send their bills.

I had been staying at a residential hotel on the outskirts of town, and now I needed a permanent place to live and work. That's why it was not only sad but ironic that my parents were killed within a week of my talk with Helen. The sadness was eased by the fact that my mother and father, who had been devoted to each other all their lives, died instantly and together. The irony was that they left me their big house exactly when I needed it.

They had offered me the run of the place, including my old room, when Helen and I separated, but for various reasons I'd chosen not to live there. Partly I didn't want to intrude on the pattern of life my folks had built for themselves and on their rediscovered delight in each other after their children — my brother and I and a sister — grew up and scattered. It was as if Mother and Dad had become young lovers again. I could see it in their faces on my weekly visits with them.

I felt their presence still when I moved in after the funeral and the reading of their wills. The house, as I say, went to me, the only nearby heir, and most of the rest of the estate went to my brother and sister. It was a thoughtful and thoroughly satisfactory bequest.

After I'd settled in, that fall afternoon, I spent a lot of time in the big room that was my parent's library, with its fireplace and wall of books and the big old family Bible on a lectern near the bay window, where it could be read by the light from outside.

I remember my parents there in the wing chairs, one on each side of the fireplace, on a Sunday morning. I remember a big square table between them, big enough to hold a mug of sharpened pencils and two copies, one for each, of the *Times* crossword puzzle. In those days it was not such a luxury to buy two copies of the Sunday *Times*. For a dollar, 50 cents each, you got an awful lot of pages, which, rolled tight, made an excellent log.

I remember them best that way on a winter morning when the fireplace glowed and there was a side table with a silver tray, and on it a carafe of coffee and a plate of small sandwiches.

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Mostly Mom finished the puzzle or gave up first. She'd beam across at Dad, who was slower but got more of the words. They had a rule that there would be no consulting the dictionary until after they had done the best they could with their own built-in vocabularies.

Only then, after comparing their efforts, did they make use of their marvelous home reference library, looking up obscure words in atlases, thesauri, encyclopedias, almanacs, concordances, and even trivia books. If a book had to do with words, they collected it for their library.

With that background it was no wonder my life became one of words, first reading, then writing them. After college I took various jobs that required word skills, first with a publishing house, then a magazine, then a wire service, all the time free-lancing articles and fiction and selling an occasional piece, until finally I realized I had novels in me. The first was rejected all round, the next two were published but barely paid their advances, but then I started to write thrillers and everything came together for me. In a writing way, that is.

About that time my family life began to fall apart. The kids had found interests outside the home, and Helen, who had always been jealous, but in a flattering, half-serious way, was now serious. There are women everywhere — (and thank God for that) in supermarkets, toll booths, restaurants — and Helen began to believe I flirted with them all. For all I knew, she thought I slipped out at night for trysts with the lady letter carrier or the cheerful checkout woman. Then one day she discovered that publishing was full of women — that they were editors, agents, and artists. I honestly believe that in her bad times Helen thought I was having an affair a day with whoever was handiest.

I put such thoughts aside. It was chilly and I lit the logs in the big fireplace in the house that now was mine. Dusk fell as I sat in my father's old chair. I had no reason to switch on the floor lamp nearby.

It was in the shadows cast by the flickering light of the fire that I saw the dim figure at the other side of the room. At first I thought I was seeing wisps of smoke, carried there by a defect in the flue. But then I saw clearly that it was a woman.

She wore a long dress, gathered at the waist, the sleeves puffed out from under a close-fitting headdress. Veiling fell from the back. The face was in shadow, although the details of her clothing were plain. I was sure now this was not my mother.

I was sure I was seeing the first ghost of my life.

No, it was not my mother, and I was glad. She and my father must have gone serenely to rest, together as they had been in life. I was sure of that.

Who was she, then? Some soul

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from another time, lost in the modern world? The figure turned and looked toward me. I could sense an effort to reach my mind with a message of some kind.

All at once the face became clear. It was that of a young woman and was vaguely familiar. When that realization came to me, that perhaps I had known her, her lips formed a little smile.

Then, as if satisfied for the moment, she vanished.

Beyond where she had stood was the wall of books my parents had collected over a lifetime. My ghost had been clearly outlined but I realized now that I had seen the books through her.

In no way was I frightened. I had no sensation that I'd seen anything that could harm me or anyone else. If I did not go immediately to the far side of the room, it was not out of trepidation. My mind was working to place the specter who had smiled when she made contact. I tried to remember where we had met, wondering why she was in Elizabethan dress.

This was not an old house; my parents had built it fifty-odd years ago. It was unlikely that anyone from a past century — the sixteenth, say — would be haunting it. But a descendant of such a person?

I *knew* her. Of that I was positive. But from where? From when? Had she been an actress, costumed for a play?

I got up then and went to where she had stood. There was no scent or other sign that anyone had been there. Had I expected a smell of grease paint or of musty clothing? A tiny waft of perfume? There was nothing.

The door to the room was closed. The window was closed. Dusk had turned to night. I paused at the lectern that held the big family Bible. It was more decorative than read except that it was the Horton family repository. All our names were written there as we appeared on earth or departed from it. The Bible had been handed down by my father's people for half a dozen generations, and I wondered if the name of my ghostly visitor was in its pages. How would I know, even if it were?

Then I had a chill. My sister, across the continent in Oregon — could the apparition have been hers? Would the telephone ring at any moment with word of another terrible accident in the family, or of a sudden, fatal illness?

But I had seen the face clearly. It was a face I recognized, but not my sister's.

Who could she have been? And why her smile? Was this shade, who had chosen to communicate with me, now no longer bound to walk the earth, but free to go to a peace beyond? Why? Who?

I had no answers and I was hungry. I hadn't stocked the kitchen with anything but instant coffee, milk, bread,

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and peanut butter, so I drove to a family-run Italian restaurant near the house Helen and I had lived in for so many years. I'd often gone there when I needed to get away from a manuscript I'd been working at too long, to get a breath of air and a cup of coffee. It was usually open late into the night.

It was early evening now, and Mrs. Prieto welcomed me and sat me down. I'd not been there for a while, and she made a fuss over me. She had cried when she heard that my parents had been killed. She asked after my children and Helen, who she was surprised to hear was now my ex-wife. Then she went to the kitchen, saying her daughter Patti would be over to take my order.

Patti was pretty, petite, raven-haired — and, at twenty-four, half my age, just beginning to be buxom like her mother. We talked for a bit, then I had the chicken parmigiana and a small bottle of wine. Patti stopped at the table from time to time to assure herself that I had everything I needed.

It was there, halfway through my meal, that it came to me. It was almost as if Helen were sitting opposite me and saying, "You're in love with her, aren't you?" Meaning Patti Prieto. "That's why you come here so often, isn't it? You thought I was blind, didn't you?"

The words in my mind were all too familiar, and I had to stop eating. That was one of the chief reasons Helen and I had divorced — her incredible jealousy.

Even now, her voice only a memory, my stomach churned at her groundless allegations. Helen had been the most jealous person I knew. I took a swallow of wine and pushed the plate away.

"Eyes bigger than your stomach?" Patti asked pleasantly. Then her mother came over to assure herself that there was nothing wrong with the food. I told Mrs. Prieto, "Something just came to me and I have to get back to the typewriter." She understood that from old times.

"A people bag, perhaps?" she asked; and I said, "No, no," but then, "Yes, please." It would be something to put in the refrigerator, saving a trip to the deli if I developed a middle-of-the-night hunger pang.

I had to get back, not to the typewriter, but to be by myself and sort out my thoughts before I lost the thread of them. The echo of Helen's voice, flinging her accusations, had opened the gate of memory.

Helen and I had got in the car that day and traveled a hundred miles to be at the wedding of her cousin Eliza.

Eliza Rayfield, a young teacher, much younger than Helen, taught music at an upstate middle school. She was marrying a forest ranger named Ben Gorman in a church ceremony. It was that era when young people arranged their own programs. The bride,

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the bridegroom, and the attendants were dressed in a twentieth-century adaptation of Elizabethan garb. Ben, an art student in college, had designed the costumes — velveteen pantaloons with silk slashings, silken hose and short jackets with ruffles at the neck and cuffs for the men, ruffles and stiff lace and puffed sleeves for the women.

In the wing chair that had been my father's, thinking of the books where I was sure I could find pictures of costumes similar to those at the wedding, thinking of my career, the jealous wife now out of my life, I remembered.

The ghost was Eliza Gorman, née Rayfield, the young woman I had met on her wedding day.

I recalled that we had really spoken only once. Eliza was a distant cousin of Helen's, so they were not close kin. During the ceremony, for which Eliza had chosen the music, I'd been much taken with a particular hymn the choir sang. The church organ and old instruments including a dulcimer and lute accompanied the choir. It was a lovely slow piece, and I was able to copy the words, more or less verbatim, in a notebook I always carried.

These were the words as I took them down:

Love one another
as I have loved you, and
Care for each other
as I have cared for you.

Bear one another's burdens
and share each other's joys
And love one another,
and love one another,
And bring each other home.

Eliza was the most beautiful bride I'd ever seen. I didn't tell her that in the receiving line because I was sure everybody else was saying something of the sort. Instead I complimented her on the music she had chosen for the ceremony. I asked her where I might find a copy of the simple hymn that spoke so movingly of trust and sharing.

Eliza was pleased by my request, but in the bustle of the moment she said only that it was home; she'd send it to me.

Helen and I moved to the buffet table. "They were childhood sweethearts," Helen said. "Ben's the only man she ever loved."

We saw them again only when we waved good-bye as they left on their honeymoon.

Oh, I had got to kiss the bride, back there in the receiving line. You can believe I heard about that later from Helen, who said, "You're in love with her, aren't you?"

Months went by. Eliza didn't send the words and music to the haunting hymn. I wondered about it from time to time but realized how busy she

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must be in her new life.

Nearly a year later, Helen said, "Eliza is dead." I was shocked. That vibrant young woman dead? How?

"It was an accident," Helen said. "You know what a snowmobile nut Ben is . . . ."

Eliza hadn't been a snowmobile enthusiast before she met Ben. I suspect she took up the sport to please him. Their winter fun in the north country came on weekends when three or four couples got together with sandwiches and beer to speed along trails and across fields. There, where the snow was on the ground from December through April, they'd follow railroad tracks and have their meal at an abandoned station or freight depot. Then they'd be off again in the twilight, taking the long way home.

They'd followed that pattern when the accident happened. It was evening now, with a rising moon. They'd made a second beer stop, as they called it — no sandwiches this time. But they were not intoxicated; the police report showed that.

Eliza, uncharacteristically, had taken the lead as they came to a big field that sloped down to the back road they planned to follow home. The moon had risen, the wind blew loose snow, and shadows were tricky. Thus Eliza probably didn't see the row of fence posts. Ben shouted a warning, but she had gunned her motor and could not have heard.

Eliza had been aglow with life. I mourned her as I would have mourned any young person cut down with such unrealized potential.

And cut down she had been. Helen gave me the details as unemotionally as if she were describing a scene in a movie. Ben had seen the wire first. He yelled and veered, and everybody was able to avoid it except Eliza, the newest and least experienced rider. It was a single-strand fence that in the spring would be electrified to keep cows in a pasture.

Eliza began a turn, but she wasn't quick enough. She was decapitated.

And when I cried, partly because of the unfeeling way Helen seemed to be telling of the accident, Helen said, "You did love her, didn't you?"

Now that we're divorced, I can think more kindly of Helen and wonder if she spoke as she did to hide her own emotion at the loss. I had come to know how Helen thought. She and I were almost a generation older than Eliza and Ben. Maybe in other circumstances I could have loved Eliza and she me, and we could have married despite the difference in our ages. Then, of course, Eliza would not have died in a snowmobile accident. My most dangerous sport was backgammon.

But of course I never said anything like that to Helen. And when she and I wrote to Ben, I didn't mention the hymn. I asked Ben about it some months later, but he said he no

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longer had Eliza's effects, having sold some and burned others. Eliza's parents, speaking with bitterness, said Ben was seeing a woman in another town. He planned to marry her after "a decent wait."

These memories were going through my head as the ghost made her second appearance. She must have been standing there, in the same place as before, as I gazed into the fire. The faint plucking of a string made me turn. It had to be Eliza; I was positive now. The music might have been that of a dulcimer, but I could make out no tune.

Then the ghost's lips moved, as before, and this with the music made me think I was hearing an accompaniment to the words I had taken down at the wedding and which I now knew by heart: "Love one another as I have loved you."

As Eliza's mouth formed the words, she tilted her head and I saw a wide black band around her throat.

"Bear one another's burdens . . ."

What burden did this poor ghost carry that kept her earthbound? Was it that the man who had been her husband was marrying another, or already had, and that he now had another's burden to share?

". . . and share each other's joys. . ."

Eliza and Ben shared nothing now. But why had she come to me?

". . . and love one another. . ."

Helen had said I loved her. Ridiculous.

". . . and love one another. . . ."

And yet — There are different kinds of love, aren't there?

Was there the faintest smile on Eliza's face?

And then the ghost was gone!

In her wake a slight breeze stirred. It moved the curtains at the bay window, although no window was open. The faint wind slowly turned a few pages of the Bible on the lectern.

A chunk of log dropped in the fireplace, startling me, and the flames leapt up. They outlined the lectern and cast its shadow on the curtains.

Had I slept and dreamed? I knew I hadn't.

The invisible dulcimer was silent.

I went to the window and looked into the darkness. I saw nothing. I sniffed the air. Did I expect the scent of a woman? There was nothing.

I touched a wall switch. Lights came on around the room, and a soft spotlight set in a traverse rod focused on the Bible. The thin pages now lay flat.

I don't know what the Bible had been opened to before, but now it was to the New Testament, the Book of John. My eyes were drawn to John 13:34 —

"A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another . . ."

"*Love one another*!" The words almost spoke in her voice.

". . . as I have loved you. . . ."

"As I have loved you!" I was transfixed.

Eliza had given me the source of

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the first verse of her wedding hymn.

I had not expected to sleep well that night, but I woke refreshed, with full recollection of all that had happened. I threw back the covers, showered, shaved, made a pot of coffee. I was ravenous. I ate the leftover chicken, drank two cups of black coffee, and was back in the library.

The fire was down to white ash over embers. I stirred it and put on a log.

The Bible was open still to John and the message of love he had given the world, so similar to the words sung at Ben's and Eliza's wedding.

A trace of snow had fallen overnight, and I went to the fire, rubbing my hands in its warmth. I had set a mug of fresh coffee on the side table between the wing chairs. Now I went to the bookshelves and took down the big concordance of the Bible — that labor of love to which so many clergymen-scholars had contributed, tracing every word of the gospel.

I also took down a small copy of the New Testament, choosing not to displace the big old family Bible. I arranged the books and the mug on the table where my parents had solved so many word puzzles, and with paper and pencil from a drawer, I set to work on this puzzle of my own.

I felt that Eliza had given me the source of the first verse by turning the pages of a book very personal to me. I chose not to believe that a gust of wind blowing down the chimney into that closed room was all that had flipped the pages to John 13:34.

Eliza now had kept half her promise to me. Maybe I could help her with the last verse, speeding the day when she could leave this earth that had used her so cruelly.

Maybe in this way I could bear part of her burden as she had borne another's — Ben's obsession with snowmobiling, perhaps? — and lost her life to it.

Was another part of that burden her promise to me? If so, it had been only half-fulfilled in the unraveling of the first verse of the hymn.

The burden! It seemed likely that the word was the key to the second and last verse. I opened the concordance.

There were burdens aplenty. Paul had found many of them, as he told us in the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians. But Galatians 6:2 stood out clearly — "Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ."

"*Bear one another's burdens . . .*"

Then, in Galatians 6:4 — "Let every man prove his own work, and then he shall have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another."

"*And share each other's joys . . .*"

Rejoicing, joy; close enough. But to rejoice alone is not to share, is it? Nor was "love one another" from

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Galatians. But that did not matter. The powerful command carried over from the first verse of our hymn writer, reverberating in the second.

Eliza herself must have written the words of the hymn, adapting the biblical words to her own needs.

I was satisfied that I had received the message I wanted, that Eliza had made good on her promise to me and that she could go to her rest.

I looked toward the bookcase and the lectern for a sign, but it was daylight. Ghosts walk the night.

Finding the phrase in Galatians on a frosty morning — the fire had gone out — was an anticlimax to the drama of last night. John had more charisma than Paul.

I was going back to John's words when the telephone rang. It was my agent calling about the new multibook contract.

I took the commuter train in to the city. We talked and, it seemed, endlessly redrafted the publisher's offer. I was exhausted when I boarded the train to return home. I fell asleep almost immediately, as I'd been able to do when I was younger and commuted five days a week.

In a vision Eliza emerged from a huge open book and took my hand. We walked in a wooded place where shadows obscured the boundaries. I could make out tall trees and the setting sun behind them. But the shadows were warm and Eliza was close.

Knowing I dreamed, I was lucid, fluent, saying things I would not have said awake. I spoke extravagantly to this young woman I barely knew. She spoke warmly in return.

"But I'm twice your age," I said, and it seemed necessary to add, "You're half mine." It was something I'd said before, having been made aware of such differences. Helen's jealousy persisted even here.

"There is no age here," Eliza said. "It matters only that we love each other."

In the dream I could sense the yearning of this shade of a girl. Once it had been for Ben. He had been her only lover, but he quickly forgot that love.

She had kept their vows, remaining faithful after death parted them. But Ben had not. By marrying again he had canceled her obligation to him. That left only her debt to me, a compulsion to seek me out and tell me the source of a love song that now only she and I remembered.

It was a promise she had to keep, one that bound her to me as I had become bound to her by that haunting hymn.

Eliza wore the Elizabethan costume of her wedding day. "You have been much in my thoughts," she said in my dream. "It was only partly because of my promise to you."

"Helen said I was in love with you."

"Were you?"

"Of course," I said and believed it true.

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"I love you still."

I looked into her eyes, deep in them and beyond. It was a disturbing look. "I see another place," I said.

"It is a good place. Although we must part soon, we'll be together there."

I thought of the last line of the hymn, one I had been unable to trace in the Bible. It must have been Eliza's own. I spoke it: ". . . and bring each other home."

"Yes, " Eliza said. "That verse among the others. Yes, my dear. Yes. Yes. "

With a last touch she walked out of the shadows into a field beyond the trees. Once she turned and waved, a silhouette in the setting sun. With confident steps she left my sight.

Somewhere in the distance was a configuration of hills that made me think of a castle suitable to Eliza's period costume. I had seen her safely home.

Now she could rest. But I was left with a fragment of conversation that persisted after she vanished. I had not said good-bye. I had said something like "Till we meet again," or "Au revoir."

And she had said, "Until then, write of my promise to you and how it was kept. And write of our coming together in a place where time has no meaning, where age is irrelevant. That will be your promise to me — to tell our story."

I came out of the dream as the conductor called the name of my station. I awoke with an ache in my right arm, where it had rested against the cold window to help cushion my head in my hand. Groggy with sleep and visions, I went from the warm train into blustery night.

My house is uphill from the station. Never had I thought of the walk as a climb. Tonight, though, I was breathing hard when I reached the front door. There was a tightness in my chest.

The dream was still vivid as I shed my topcoat. I made a drink and took it to the library.

At the lectern the Bible lay open to John, as I had left it . Again I read the words "love one another . . . as I have loved you."

In the familiar surroundings of my house, I marveled at the vow I had made to a ghost — to the dream of a ghost. Had I really promised to write the story of our love? Our *love*? A mortal in love with a ghost? Come on!

I was beginning to be amused by all that had happened in the dream. What else had I promised? What had my dream-ghost said?

I skimmed through the Book of John and came to other words Eliza had spoken. I had forgotten them until I read them again on the page: "Thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow me afterwards."

This was more than the memory

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of a dream, or of words I'd first read that morning. This was Eliza speaking to me.

I found no answering pull from the familiar room with its dead fire. The wing chairs, the wall of books said nothing to me.

The chill in my arm was gone, but now there was an icy spot under my shoulder blades. Was I having a heart attack? I pushed the thought away.

I put down the glass, remembering another place. I had seen the future in Eliza's eyes. She said we'd be together where time had no meaning. Had she said "soon"?

A mixture of joy and regret took me to the typewriter. For a moment I dreaded to touch the keys.

In my mind's eye I saw Eliza again. She smiled and beckoned. I began to write our story.

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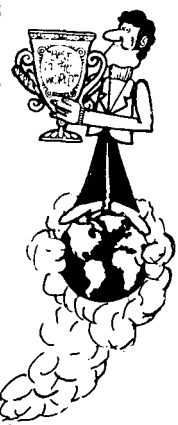

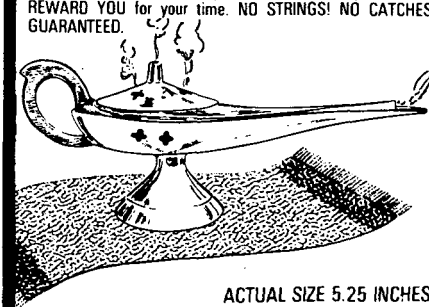

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The high purpose is writing, and this unique story follows two famous writers into a compelling "real world" situation. Barry Malzberg's most recent novel is THE REMAKING OF SIGMUND FREUD (Del Rey); Carter Scholz last appeared in F&SF with "Altamira," (December 1981).

The High Purpose

BY

BARRY N. MALZBERG and CARTER SCHOLZ

Passing Youngstown, Ohio, its steel mills flaming beyond an unseen horizon, Hammett said, "They're behind us."

Chandler's reaction, he noted with disgust, was to take his foot off the gas. The Cadillac Sedan de Ville wallowed, began to slide, and Chandler had to fight the wheel to straighten it.

"Son of a bitch," said Chandler. "Dirty son of a bitch."

"Your choice," Hammett said. Chandler had picked out the car in the lot, had even argued for it, until Hammett had reluctantly gone along. What did he know about cars, anyway? The best part of his experience had been on foot, peering into warehouses and protecting scabs. Whereas Chandler was part of the gentry; he went everywhere on wheels, or so he said. Goddamned Englishman.

"How long?" Chandler asked.

"Till what?"

"I mean how long have they been back there, for Christ's sake? And what the hell do they want?"

Hammett hated it when the Englishman cursed. It sounded like something he'd practiced. So he said, "I don't know." He knew all right, or at least had a good idea, but if Chandler couldn't figure it out for himself, Hammett couldn't tell him.

Chandler pressed the accelerator again, and the overpowered car lurched ahead, spilling into the shoulder.

"Take it easy," Hammett said. "Don't let them know we've seen them." He was certain that their pursuers already knew that. If nothing else, Chandler's erratic driving just then had told them. But he wanted to calm Chandler down. He was an inept driver at best. Hammett should

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have been driving, but there was no time to make the switch, and in any case he hadn't been behind the wheel for six years, since that incident in Juarez. So they were stuck.

"How far back?" said Chandler.

"A mile or more. Don't worry about it." Hammett looked at the gas gauge. They had filled up outside Cleveland, and now there was three-quarters of a tank left. He didn't know if they'd have time to stop again.

Hammett didn't want to think about how they had gotten into it. But retrospection seemed obligatory; the turnpike offered nothing but trucks shuddering past them on both sides, or Chandler occasionally making an insane lunge up between a couple of barreling monsters. If he had been writing this situation instead of living it, this would have been the time to drop in exposition, cast his mind back to reveal the reasons for the flight with Raymond Chandler in a Cadillac from a bunch of professionals who wanted to kill them. But he did not want to think about it. You simply had to keep moving forward, and pick up the pieces later, if at all. This was about the worst time he'd ever had, but then again, it had been bad before and he had gotten out.

At fifty-six your life should have leveled out; the unpredictable or menacing might come from an affair or from bad news at the annual physical, but it should not connect to chases in cars, frantic evasive maneuvers, and a panicky Englishman at the wheel who would rather be sipping tea in La Jolla. I should not have gotten into this, Hammett thought, and he had to smile at that: his whole life was a matter of situations he should not have gotten into.

He leaned back in the seat, closed his eyes. Let Chandler run the car up the tail pipe of a semi. He was so tired of it all. Yet he felt the skittering of his heart, and with one ear kept alert to Chandler's panic. Chandler seemed to be murmuring. Praying, perhaps.

Chandler was not praying. He was recalling when Hammett had proposed the idea to him. Hammett had been reasonable; the idea itself had seemed sensible. They would simply get away. Away from the circumstantial grinding down of their essence that had entrapped them both. Why not? They could afford it. They were not rich, but their work had made them comfortable. Why not use the profits from the work to get away from the work, and the life connected to it?

The difference was that Chandler was still working, and Hammett had given up long ago. He was obviously never going to write again. He made noises about a mainstream novel, had even told Chandler the title one drunken night in Nebraska — *Tulip* — and when Chandler wrinkled his nose at that, gave the title his profes-

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sional scorn, Hammett had simply shrugged and upended the bourbon bottle into his mouth. No, the man was burned out, gone. *Tulip* (unbelievable that he was so far gone as to even consider such a title!) would be discovered as a jumble of notes after his death, and Hellman or some other executor would have a hell of a time trying to put it into publishable shape.

But Chandler was working, despite everything. Wasn't he? *The Long Goodbye* no longer seemed like a joke or a mockery. After countless evasions, he had finally sat down to it with some of the old dedication to getting the job done. And the work came. It was good. It would be longer than anything he had done before, and possibly the best thing he had ever done. And despite that, Chandler had not been able to stand up against Hammett when he had proposed the idea.

The two men had met just once before, at a 1936 West Coast get-together for *Black Mask* contributors. Chandler still had the photograph. He was looking across at Hammett with a certain measured resentment in his features, and Hammett was returning the look. He doubted that Dashiell remembered. After all, Hammett was through writing by then, had come just for the booze, and Chandler had scarcely started. He had not seen the man again until he came to Chandler with the idea.

The high purpose, Hammett had called it. To Chandler, writing had always been the high purpose: writing against the grain of things, of manners, of the literary snobs, of the genteel English mystery novelists. Death is real, murder is not a hobby of the upper class. The streets are mean, and someone must walk them and say so. But Hammett was persuasive. "Come on, Ray," he had said. "You don't *believe* all that crap, do you?" And for the moment at least, Chandler had to admit, yes, it *was* crap, it was all made up, he had never even seen a corpse; Marlowe was as estranged from him as Sam Spade was from Dashiell, whose Pinkerton days were spent mostly patrolling warehouses and protecting scabs.

Perhaps it was that Dashiell had been there first. Hammett would always be regarded as his predecessor. It wasn't fair; the man was actually younger than he, had not even much wanted to be a writer — yet in Chandler's mind (and probably Hammett's, though Chandler had never been able to draw him out on this), he was always going to be regarded as an imitator. No, it wasn't fair. Hammett's "experience" as a detective had been of no use to his writing (though it helped his career); of far more use had been his reading of Hemingway. At least Chandler had had the taste not to imitate that. Yet it was true that Chandler had learned from Hammett. And therefore, he had gone along with the scheme. Had even sug-

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gested going East, had bought the car, had collaborated in every way. Had put himself in this situation.

Son of a bitch, Chandler thought. Who is there to blame? Hammett seemed to be asleep. If the trucks flanking them moved together, Hammett would not even note the transition from life to death. He had always been that kind of man. And maybe that was the source of his strength; that he did not give a damn, seemed to have internalized death to the point where everything in life came easy. That could be why he had stopped writing. Chandler did not know. His hands were damp on the wheel, and he wished he were back in L.A., bringing Cissy her tea, even working on some piece of shit screenplay, drunk and in despair — anything but this. But there was no way to stop now, no way until the very end.

Outside Pittsburgh, two men stretched themselves under the mercury-vapor lamps of a Cities Service gas station while an attendant in a pressed uniform filled the tank of their Ford.

"They're getting ahead, you know," said the man named Smith.

"Let them," said Jones. "Where can they go?"

To Hammett, it had seemed easy at the time. The plan had elegance and economy. When it came to him, its elegance and economy reminded him first of how he felt working on the early stories in San Francisco. And second, of his more recent moments of despair, which were not always drunken. Despair, he wanted to go back and tell the kid on Eddy Street at the borrowed typewriter, has a clarity all its own. What do you think you are after here? Words on paper are not it. You will end up at your destination whether or not you do this.

The kid would occasionally glance up at him, not quite seeing him, a look of puzzlement on his keen face that might have been a recognition of the shifted air in the cheap room, or simply a plot point or adjective that needed work. No way to tell.

The thing was, he could not do it alone. He wrote exclusively about loners, but he was not one. the unfinished *Tulip* proved that, if his "visits" to the kid did not. You are talking to yourself, he wanted to tell the kid, because you want company. It's pathetic.

So he had sought out Chandler.

What a mistake, he thought now.

Perhaps he'd been drunken and sentimental when he made the decision. Wouldn't surprise him. He'd thought of Chandler as a peer because, of all the people who'd written in the genre, they were the two best. How was he to know that Chandler was as troubled as he and even less capable of coping with the paraphernelia of existence? In the clarity

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of despair, it had seemed easy: get away, just the two of them, abdicate, cultivate some kind of exile, find a new world. Away from the committees, the politicians, the pressures, the scriptwriters, the critics, the Communists, away from everything. Even Lillian. Oh, yes, Lillian was part of it, all right.

He came full awake as the Cadillac's horn bleated faintly against the roar of wind. The speedometer, in green, showed eighty-five. Chandler leaned out the open driver's window to shout at a truck he was passing on the right. At the end of the downgrade, the car bottomed out, and Hammett felt his stomach bounce in sympathy as the machine lazily adjusted on its springs to the accumulated inertia. We have no chance, Hammett thought.

The pursuers picked them up again slightly past Harrisburg. Hammett was beginning to worry. It was as if they would not wait for the end of the line, would not follow the neat strictures of a well-made plot, would instead blow them off the road in a gesture of anarchy without even the clarity of despair, or the requiem of a curt denouement. He had not expected this, but he felt now, emanating from the headlights behind them, a feral hunger beyond anything in the world he lived in. He recognized it: it was the hunger beneath the surface of what he had written. It was something he had flirted with, in the solipsism of creation, something he had acknowledged without endorsing, something he had denied without mastering. Something real. Something just coming of age now in 1951, something with a face bland as the face of Elisha Cook, who'd played the gunsel in Huston's film of *The Maltese Falcon,* but with a chill scent of machinery beneath it. Something like the screenplay that fellow Shulman had lately told him about, *Rebel Without a Cause,* something new entirely, yet something he could have, should have foreseen.

Chandler felt it, too. His driving improved. He ceased to fiddle with the dash controls, the radio, but put all his attention on the road. Hammett's respect for him renewed somewhat. Yes, Chandler had felt that whiff of the beyond, the thing without a face that lurked at the edge of implication of all their work. He felt it now, and applied himself to the craft of outrunning it. At the wheel, at the typewriter — no difference. The unpredictable line of the road, the unpredictable turns of a plot, the nuance of a curve or a line of dialogue — he was again glad that he had company, and almost glad that it was Chandler. The man was not one of the worst.

"Raymond," said Hammett. How strange: he was feeling loquacious. "It doesn't matter, you know. None of it matters. The work, the money,

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the critics — nothing. Only this. Keeping ahead of them."

Chandler said nothing. The road unwound beneath the headlights.

Smith said, "What is it about, exactly?"

Jones sighed. It had been a mistake to go with Smith, but that was the best he could do. He had found the man hanging out in the lobby of a hotel. The desk clerk had been eyeing Smith suspiciously. At that point Jones had been none too clear on his own motivations, so he had moved by instinct, had steered Smith outside, and had talked with him.

He must have been persuasive. For Smith had gone along with it. Get a car, find their quarry, follow them, kill them. That simple. For a reason they both somehow understood, but had not yet articulated.

"Go to sleep, Smith," said Jones. "What it's about doesn't matter. If we knew what it was about, *exactly,* would we do it?"

"I know what I want," muttered Smith. "I want them dead."

"Why, *exactly?* Why do you want that, Smith?" He was pressing things. Trying to find a limit. But Smith was not interested in that. Not yet.

Suddenly Hammett said, "Pull off here."

Chandler's hands responded first. His brain was half asleep.

"We'll switch now," said Hammett, getting out of the car.

Chandler was still sitting slumped at the wheel when Hammett reached the driver's door.

"Give it a rest, Ray. I know this place."

Chandler got out and went around to the passenger side. Hammett drove a leisurely quarter mile, and turned up a smaller road. They followed this in silence for a half hour. Chandler dozed fitfully, could not help himself, and came out of it feeling that he'd fallen asleep at the wheel. Then he'd turn, frantic, to look at the dark void behind him, scanning for the glow of headlights behind the last rise.

They stopped in front of a dark farmhouse.

"Sid Perelman's place," said Hammett. "You know Sid? Pep West's brother-in-law. Pep put me up at the Sutton Club Hotel after I skipped the Pierre in '32. I was broke and I had to finish *Falcon.* Pep moved out here for a while after that."

"Is Perelman here?" Chandler asked.

"I doubt it. I doubt it very much."

Suddenly Hammett put the car in gear and drove it over grass to a spot behind a carriage house. He doused the lights and left the car. He walked briskly back over the grass, scuffing it with his shoes, and bending to brush it with his hand. He looked up. Headlights approached from behind a hill. He returned to the car.

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It would be a hell of a way to die. Somehow he *had* expected Sid to be here. The natty attire, the unfailing good humor, the wit that didn't grate on him the way wit usually did. He had even thought Pep might be here. But Pep had been dead for ten years.

He said nothing about the headlights to Chandler. Instead he said, "Christmas 1940 was awfully merry, wasn't it?"

"What's it about?"

"You remember — Scott Fitzgerald, and the day after that Pep West. Two of the best. Dead within a day of each other."

Yes, Chandler remembered. They had all been in Hollywood. He had just finished *Farewell, My Lovely,* and there seemed a chance that the movie rights would go.

Then Chandler heard the motor.

"Don't move," Hammett said. "Don't make a sound." A hell of a way to die. In a car. In a car that he had driven into a blind alley, expecting some sort of supernal grace to descend on him. A last visit to Sid and Pep, to old times, maybe a way out of the whole rotten mess of the past twenty years, a way out of the bad way out he'd talked Chandler into. He had honestly thought that their pursuers would pass the place without a thought. He'd underestimated them.

Chandler was panicked again. Hammett wondered if he'd have to slug the Englishman.

The motor stopped. Steps came up the gravel. A flashlight beam played in the grass past where they were parked behind the carriage house. Hammett felt the first tickle of a coughing fit snake up his lungs. He swallowed hard.

Hammett shut his eyes. A few minutes later he heard low voices, the crunch of gravel again. The motor started. The other car drove off.

"Jesus!" Chandler whispered.

Hammett was shaking and did not trust his voice. He got out and let Chandler take the wheel.

Chandler insisted on having literary discussions. Mostly Hammett pretended to be asleep. It was pathetic, the way Chandler harped on what Charles Morton had said about him in the *Atlantic,* and how the English regarded him as a literary writer. Hammett had had far too much of that shit. When he'd first met Lillian, he was a pulp writer. Soon enough he was a celebrity. Gertrude Stein had put him in a novel; he'd met her once at a party in Beverly Hills. Chaplin was there, too; he recalled nothing else except passing out drunk. Lillian's connections. God, it was awful, and to hear Chandler going on about this kind of culture, sometimes in awe, still like a fifth-former who'd once met Yeats, it was nauseous.

Chandler was the older man; that was the odd thing. Not one reader in a hundred knew this, because Chan-

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dler had started to write much later in life than Hammett, had started to write in fact after Hammett had finished. And because he had chosen to write in Hammett's genre, inevitably he seemed a follower. Whose fault was that? Hammett wondered. Not his. In a way he was gratified that Chandler had done it. It vindicated him. For one thing, he no longer had to do it himself.

But it also annoyed him. Chandler had seen the strong bones of Hammett's work — give him that — and had known enough to use what was usable. But he had fleshed out the skeleton with his own evasions and preciousness. And that Hammett didn't like. It was theft and fakery. Well, who was he to complain? If he called that theft, then Hemingway had a case against him.

At least Hemingway and I could tell the real from the literary, he thought. Better than this one, anyway. He glanced over at Chandler's pinched face as a light swept past overhead.

He was tired of thinking. Face it, he couldn't tell the real any better than the rest of them. If he could, he wouldn't be in this situation. He had no right to rag Chandler. Hadn't his own first sale been to Mencken at *Smart Set?* Hadn't he loved the parties Lillian took him to, at first? What crap. And Mencken bought *Black Mask* — slumming, it turned out, just using it and *Saucy Stories* to fund his tony journals. So Hammett had written for *Black Mask,* but by then Mencken was gone and he had "Cap" Shaw to deal with.

But that wasn't quite it. It was more that he had written *too* well, had gotten close enough to the real to bring things into being. As had Chandler. You were hagridden by the real before you started, and it only got worse and worse. He'd put something into *The Thin Man* (and Jesus, how he hated Nick and Nora by now), a two-thousand-word quote about cannibalism from *Celebrated Criminal Cases in America,* just dropped it into the middle of a scene, wrecking the whole dramatic flow. It was the only thing he still liked about the book.

"Ray," he said, "it is the beginning of the end when you discover you have style."

"If I had been driving, this wouldn't have happened," Smith said. "I could have caught them. I'm a better driver than you. I used to do the Ventura Highway for fun."

Jones had a headache. Ever since they'd lost the pair outside Erwinna, Pennsylvania, Smith had been ragging him. And Smith didn't yet have the faintest idea of what was at stake.

True, Jones had blundered. He should have checked the farm more closely. He hadn't because it had smelled strange. Now he felt certain that they had been there. But it didn't

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matter. They couldn't get away.

"I mean it, Jones. Once, ten years ago, I drove from Chicago to L.A. — that's over two thousand miles — in a day. No sleep, just stops for gas. And I was still fresh at the end."

"Ten years ago. Good for you, Smith."

"You think I'm some kind of nut," Smith said. "You don't respect me, you think I'm a fool, you think because you can sit there and say nothing, you're somehow stronger or better than I am, but that's not true. You don't know me, Jones. You don't know what I've been through."

"All right," said Jones. He thought: Tell me about it, tell me about what true is.

"Those guys," said Smith. "They know nothing of it. It's dirt, all of it, but bright dirt. They think they know it. They write it up, they sound tough, they make it seem real. But it's just words. They don't know what a heel in the gut feels like. They never got shot." He paused, looked at the gun in his hand. "I want them to know pain. Just once I want them to feel what it's like. Can you understand that, Jones?"

Yes, Jones thought, I can understand that. But he said nothing.

"One shot for each. That's not too much to ask."

That's not what we're here for, Jones thought. You're getting personal again. We're not here to get personal. But he said nothing. There was absolutely nothing to say.

"If we lose them, Jones, if *you* lose them" — and Smith's voice was slightly different now, as deep and as slow as the voice Jones had tried to cultivate over the years — "if it happens that way, I'm going to kill *you*. I just want you to know that."

Jones said, "And then what?"

"And then we'll see. But it won't matter to you."

No, it won't, Jones thought. I believe him.

"You still think I'm a clown?"

"No," Jones said, "I don't think you're a clown."

As they passed through the strange dead towns of west Jersey, Chandler tried to imagine what he had ever seen in the plan. He had left his work, just when he was getting back to it; had left Cissy, who needed him now more than ever; had just walked out of his life. It was utterly out of character. He wasn't a roving bum like Hammett. And it was not just the strength of the man's character — true, going along seemed a way to make something up to Hammett, to cancel for once and all the claims of imitation. If he did this for Hammett, he wouldn't owe the man a thing, ever again.

But he had his own reasons for wanting to get away. He was sixty-two now. Cissy, his wife, was eighty, and dying by half-inches. He couldn't stand it. Perhaps it was foolish to

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have married her, but he'd been only thirty then, and she was beautiful at forty-eight: bright, full of life, a fighter. It tore him up to live with those memories now, day in and out, getting the meals, doing the shopping. He remembered how it had been last year when they'd had to put their black cat, Taki, to sleep. A shot of Nembutal in the leg, and two seconds later she wasn't there. The vet gave another shot straight to the heart to make sure. Why, when you were ready to give up, did it have to be any harder than that?

Oh, yes, he could still see the attraction in the plan. But he had known after an hour on the road that it was impossible. All Hammett wanted to do was drink and abuse Chandler for not really understanding his material, how painful life really was. All he wanted to do, really, was to abuse Chandler, call him an effete Englishman who was slumming by writing for *Black Mask*. Chandler painstakingly pointed out that he was born in Chicago, that his British naturalization had never been legal (he was having tax problems over that one), and that he had never looked down on the mystery, only on bad writing. Hammett said he had never heard such shit. Chandler, driving, had watched Hammett get drunker and drunker and had begun drinking himself, probably just to prove that he could not be intimidated in that way, and after that the trip had become a nightmare, a disaster. He had nearly killed them both outside Chicago. He had cut out the drinking then (Hammett's capacity was unmatchable, in any case), and even Hammett had sobered up slightly.

The two assassins must have picked them up about then, although Hammett thought that it was far earlier. That they had been trailed from the very beginning. Chandler wondered if this was some Communist or FBI scenario that Hammett had perversely involved him in, but in his heart he knew it wasn't. He knew the assassins were after him just as much as Hammett. And for the same reasons.

And he had admired this man. Well, it was over now. Especially after that business at the farm. He was tempted to try something like it himself: cut the engine, pull over, throw the keys, and wait for them to close in. It would be a proper and fitting ending to the whole mess.

But he knew he did not have the courage. So he kept driving, kept on the strange dark west Jersey roads watching for a glimmer of pursuit in the mirror, hating Hammett, hating himself, hating everything that was represented everywhere.

They had turned onto Route 9W in Nyack, New York. The assassins had picked them up again. Hammett risked turning in the seat, saw fog and darkness. Little fumes seemed to be coming up from the center of the

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road, dark clouds of poison. He had thought California ugly, but this was worse. In the distance behind him he saw the headlights, cutting through the fog.

"Half mile back," he said. "Maybe less."

Chandler nodded grimly, gripping the wheel. His face was twisted in boyish frustration. "It isn't fair," he said. He pounded the wheel once, abruptly, jiggled the gas pedal, then had to brake sharply as the car entered a curve. "Isn't *fair,"* he said again. "We can't outrun them."

"You picked the car," said Hammett.

"Damn it!" Chandler said. "I know I picked the car! Why do you have to keep telling me that? It's all my fault, all right? We're going to die on this road, and the last thing I'll hear is you telling me it was my decision."

"All right," Hammett said.

"You went along with it. You —"

"I know that," Hammett said. He turned in the seat again. The lights were the size now of an animal's eyes, brighter now in the fog. "They're gaining on us. You'd better try something."

"Like what? It was your choice, too, your goddamned plan. This is no time to put it all on me —"

"I said it's *all right,"* Hammett said sharply. Chandler yanked the wheel left, then right. The car went almost out of control. He's going to kill us, thought Hammett. They won't even have to catch us. "Just drive," he said quietly. "If we can get to the bridge, we have a chance."

"No chance," said Chandler hopelessly. "No chance from the very beginning."

Hammett sighed. The man was right. But at the mention of the bridge, Chandler pumped the gas. Perhaps he could be given hope, Hammett thought. Hold him together somehow. It couldn't be more than five miles now; they were into Jersey again, had just passed Tenafly; if they could get into New York City, they might be able to lose them in the streets.

The assassins, after the almost desultory pursuit from Pennsylvania, seemed to sense this, too. They knew far less about Manhattan than Hammett did, of course; he had only once written about New York, though he had lived there, on and off, for over twenty years. And Chandler had never written about it.

They came from a deep curve on the treacherous highway. Chandler pumped the gas. "Maybe there is a chance," Chandler said.

Hammett said nothing. He watched the road. The poisonous fog whipped past them.

Smith said, "This is it. We've got to catch them soon. We've got to stop them before they carry this on any further."

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Jones shrugged, but something in the younger man's tone made him uneasy. "Don't know," he said.

"We can't permit it." Smith looked at the Colt .45 in his hand. "Our mission is clear. Sometimes you have to draw a line."

Jones worked the heater. He didn't like the road, he didn't like the fog, and he increasingly didn't like Smith. He wondered if he had been like this on his first job. Probably; he remembered shooting the middle-aged fat ex-dick who'd been his partner. Left him by the side of a road outside Seattle. Never knew his name.

No, thought Jones. This line of thought is not reassuring.

In the far distance he could see the ghost of the Cadillac's taillights, but Chandler had opened the distance in the past few miles.

"Don't they understand?" said Smith. "It can't go on and on. There had to be an end to it." He looked at the gun. "I don't want to be here. I never wanted to be here. Nobody wants to be here, but there's a job and there has to be a man to do it."

If only the silly son of a bitch would shut up, thought Jones. I don't want to hear the messages he's getting. I've heard them too often. Maybe I've done this too often. What year is it, anyway?

"We're not going to make it, are we?" Smith said.

"I don't know. It's close." Had he ever made it? Had he ever, once, in all the chases, actually made it? He could see Hammett's thin face laughing at the question. He jammed the accelerator to the floor.

"Let me drive," said Smith.

"No. No time to switch."

"They're going to make it, aren't they?" Smith said. "They're going to get over the bridge and into the streets and we'll lose them, and it will all be like this never was. That's what's going to happen, isn't it, Jones?"

"I don't know," Jones said. "It's possible." And went on driving.

With the bridge in sight now, Chandler pulled a maneuver. He hit the brakes and drifted toward a closed Texaco station, its lights out, its pumps covered by cloth.

"No," Hammett said, suddenly going cold. He didn't like the scene, not a bit; it seemed too familiar. "Don't do it."

"Don't do what?"

"Don't stop."

"Look, Dash, we can wait them out —"

"You stupid bastard," Hammett said, and for the first time on this drive, he felt himself losing his temper, as he had not even at the hotel in Chicago where Chandler had gotten drunk and gone around the dining room telling everyone that they were in the presence of two of the major writers of the century. "We can't wait anybody out. We're running for our

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lives now. They're not going to make that mistake at the farm twice."

"Listen, Dash...."

"No, *you* listen. It's just words for you. This is not another plot, not some made-up fantasy; those guys are serious, they're here to kill us. And they will if you don't show some control." He kicked Chandler in the calf. "Drive."

They were rolling slowly towards the Texaco's entrance. Chandler pulled back to the left, accelerated past the closed station. "They're coming up on us again," he said.

"Of course they're coming up on us: you lost us time."

"Listen, Dash. This was your idea. Remember that. If we're here at all, it's because of you. I didn't start this, you did —"

Always, Hammett thought. It always comes to this. Even at the end he will deny it, will put it all on me. But maybe he is right. It is all my fault. It did originate with me. Even though he brought it to this.

"We have a chance if you push it," Hammett said.

"All my life I pushed it," said Chandler. "Maybe it's time to stop pushing. Maybe I should go back to England. Maybe —"

"Will you shut up." Hammett felt an almost murderous rage.

"I left Cissy back there. I left her." Chandler was almost crying now. "Everything I did or wrote was just a fire for her to warm her hands by."

The miserable fucked-up bastard, Hammett thought. He said, "And I had a dog once, but it died."

Chandler turned to him with the look of a maniac. Behind the round glasses his eyes were berserk. Then he suddenly laughed. The car lurched as it went into the shoulder, and Chandler wrestled it back, breathing through his teeth.

Smith said, "They're going to make it. They're two hundred yards short of the toll booths, that's all."

Jones was not too upset. In the wake of the motels and fast-food joints in the past mile, in the spatter of light from the bridge, he had gained visibility and was closing ground. At the booths it might be a dead heat. It would not be as neat as it would have been if Chandler had pulled off into the Texaco, but he thought he could improvise.

"I won't let them make it," Smith said. "When they stop to pay the toll, I'll shoot them. We'll come up fast behind them and have a shot."

"Sure," Jones said. "And every attendant and Port Authority cop will be on us in thirty seconds. Why not just shoot the both of us and be done with it?"

"They can't get away with this," Smith said. "It's our lives, too."

Jones watched the Cadillac take the last curve, begin to move up the ramp. It was about 4 A.M. There were a few cars scattered in the space be-

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tween them and the booths, but not enough to make a difference. Jones wondered who they all were, what they were doing out at this hour, at the edge of that great city built of real steel around a core of fantasy. A collaborative fantasy, he realized. Of course. Not just Smith and me out here with our mission; not just the dark roads and the fog and the mean streets and the blood; not just the victims of some arbitrary creation, but collaborators in it. We have collaborated with those two bastards up ahead in our victimization. That's it, he thought. We can't take them because we didn't realize that from the start. We went along with it. How repellent, he thought, and how true.

Smith seemed to have some sense of it, too, as the unreality of the dark roads yielded to the day-bright mercury lamps all around them. "We might have another chance yet," Smith said. "We're supposed to get rid of them, remember? Isn't that what we're supposed to do?"

"I don't know," Jones said. "I honestly don't know."

"Let me take over," Smith begged. "Let me do it."

"I don't know," Jones said. "I don't think I care anymore." And maybe that was it. How could you care? Halfway into the century, knowing what he knew, having lived through what he had done, was it possible to care anymore? He could feel the fog seeping through the windows, getting into his skin. He could feel the future dissolving him.

"Do what you have to," he said to Smith. "It's your life. It's my life. It's their lives, too."

As they neared the booths, Hammett saw Chandler think about running them. He put his hand, holding a quarter, on top of Chandler's right hand on the wheel, squeezing it.

"No," he said. "We don't attract attention. We don't give them a chance at a scene. We pay the toll like good citizens. Roll down the window."

"They're coming up fast, Dash,"

"What happened in the last scene of *The Lady in the Lake?*"

Chandler looked over at him. It was the first direct acknowledgment he had that Hammett had read any of his stuff. In that last scene the heavy runs a sentry post on a dam. Shortly after, at the bottom of the dam, is the wreck of a car and something that had been a man.

"You think we have a chance?"

"We pay the toll," said Hammett, withdrawing his hand. Chandler took the quarter and put it between his teeth.

"I wanted to be a serious writer, Dash," said Chandler between his clenched teeth. "I wasn't really writing mysteries, I thought I was writing literature."

"I figured that out," Hammett said,

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thinking, now he's going to go confessional on me. We're going to make it, and I'm going to end up living with this lunatic.

Chandler took the coin out of his mouth, started to roll down the window. "Maybe I was wrong, maybe I shouldn't have looked down on the mystery. I didn't really...."

Yes, Hammett thought, and maybe you should have thought that a bullet in the heart is a bullet in the heart and not a thing learned out of books. That a corpse is no symbol. Now that we're closing in on you from behind and you're starting to think for the first time, but it's a little goddamned late, isn't it, Ray? A little late in the day for all that to occur to you — and don't tell me better late than never.

Chandler extended his left arm to the attendant. His head lolled back, as if awaiting the bullet.

Now you understand, Hammett thought. Now, when it's too late, as it's too late for all of us, now you finally see what it all really means.

The attendant was ignoring them. "I was wrong, Dash. But that doesn't make it all my fault, does it?"

You poor bastard, Hammett thought. You still don't understand that implication is universal and that we take the shroud the moment we open our eyes.

The attendant looked up, took the toll from Chandler. Directly behind them, almost touching their bumper, was the other car.

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Smith sat holding the gun in his lap while Jones idled the engine and then cut it, stopping the car in the far right emergency lane just past the booths.

"I couldn't do it," he said, trembling.

"I know," Jones said.

"Right up to the last minute. But then I couldn't."

"Don't think about it." Jones didn't want to talk. He just wanted to continue over the bridge, then bear left all the way around the terminal and come back out. Back into the darkness.

"Why couldn't I? I know all about them. I knew they had to die. I knew it was up to me. There was no other way. But I couldn't. Why, Jones?"

"You're not the first."

"What?"

"A lot of us find that out. More than you would think. It isn't the same when you have to do it."

"I've killed before. I know what death is."

Jones leaned forward and started the engine. It took awhile. The Ford seemed to have given up also.

"Really," Smith said. "I really have. That's the truth."

"Sure," Jones said. "You know the truth about everything." He got the car moving. He stayed in the far right lane, doing thirty.

"I didn't see you pulling any gun."

"I didn't expect to."

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"Then why did you tell me —"

"I didn't tell you anything. I didn't tell you anything at all. We each live our own lives within an abyss. That's all I know. That's all the truth there is."

Smith wiped at his eyes. "I hate this," he said, "I *hate* it."

"We all do," Jones said. "But we keep doing it, don't we?"

At the Fifty-sixth Street exit on the West Side Highway, Chandler finally said, "I think we lost them."

"All right," Hammett said.

"I don't think they crossed the bridge."

"I think that's right," said Hammett.

"Why? Why did they give up?"

"I don't know," Hammett said. He thought that he did know, but it was nothing to discuss. "We'll take a room somewhere. The Sutton Club is long gone, but there's a cheap place near Times Square, the Dixie. Jam-packed with hookers. In the morning we'll figure out our next move."

"You think we got away for good?"

"We have to act like we did. Otherwise, what's the point?"

"Why would they let us go like that?"

"I don't know," Hammett said. "Maybe your sensational driving scared them off."

Chandler looked at him sidelong. "You think I'm stupid."

"I didn't say that."

"We were dead meat back there. But they let us go."

"Apparently."

"Why do you think so?"

Hammett shrugged. "Maybe they understood. Maybe it's that."

"Understood what?"

"What they had to. And no more."

First Chandler would unpack the good whiskey he had been saving in his valise since leaving the Coast. Then he would call the bellhop for some ice and have a drink. Then he would have another drink and try to figure his next move. Maybe he would work on *The Long Goodbye.* Maybe he could convince Hammett to do some work, even on that damned *Tulip,* but probably not. It didn't matter now.

"Dash," he would say.

Hammett would look at him. "What now?"

"Do you think it might be any different since we got away? That it might be a fresh start or something?"

"No," Hammett would say. "You never get away."

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THE BIOCHEMICAL KNIFE BLADE

I was in a theater not too long ago, waiting for the curtain to go up, and a white-haired woman approached me and said, "Dr. Asimov, we were schoolmates once."

"Really?" I said, with my usual suavity. "You scarcely look old enough."

"But I was," she said. "In P.S. 202."

I was galvanized, for I had been at P.S. 202 between the ages of 8 and 10. I told her that.

"I know," she said. "I remember you, because the teacher told us once that a certain city was the capital of a certain state, and you piped up at once and told her she was wrong, and that a different city was the capital. She argued with you and, at lunch time, you dashed home and came back with a big atlas and proved you were right. I never forgot that. Do you remember it?"

To which I replied, ruefully, "No, in all honesty, I don't, but I know I was that boy just the same, for I was the only kid in school stupid enough to offend and humiliate a teacher just because I refused to pretend I was wrong when I knew I was right."

Then, at the intermission to that play, I proved that I was still as stupid as ever. A second woman approached me and asked for my autograph on the playbill, and I acceded, of course.

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She said, "Yours is only the second autograph I have ever asked for, Dr. Asimov."

"Whose was the other?" I asked.

"Lawrence Olivier's," she said.

I smiled and opened my mouth to thank her, but I heard myself say, "How honored Olivier would feel if he knew the company he kept."

It was intended as humor, of course, but the woman walked away silently and without as much as the tiniest smile, and I knew I had just further reinforced my reputation for monstrous vanity.

Don't think, then, that I don't feel a distinct twinge every time I sit down to write one of these essays, wondering, as I do, whether my natural stupidity will show up too clearly this time. Let's hope it doesn't as I write the fourth and last of my vitamin related essays.

A protein molecule is made up entirely, or almost entirely, of one or more chains of "amino acids."

At one end of an amino acid is an "amine group," made up of a nitrogen atom and two hydrogen atoms ($-NH_2$). At the other end is a "carboxylic acid group" made up of a carbon atom, two oxygen atoms and a hydrogen atom ($-COOH$). (That's why it's called an amino acid.)

In between the amine group and the carboxylic acid group is a single carbon atom that is bonded to each. That carbon atom has two additional bonds, one of which is attached to a hydrogen atom, and the other to a "side-chain."

This side-chain can be another hydrogen atom, or it can be one of a variety of carbon-containing groups of atoms. The various amino acids that are found in protein molecules differ from each other in the nature of their side-chains. There are twenty different amino acids that are to be found in almost any protein molecule you isolate from living tissue, and each has a different side-chain.

Amino acids tie together when the amine group of one combines with the carboxylic acid group of another. A long succession of such hookups makes a chain of amino acids, and the important thing about such a chain is that the side-chains remain untouched and stick out of the chain like charms on a bracelet.

Every amino acid chain has a natural tendency to curve, bend, and double up at particular places, thus forming a three-dimensional object with the side-chains sticking out here and there like fuzz. Some of the side-chains are small; some are bulky; some have no electric charge;

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some have a positive electric charge; some have a negative electric charge; some have a tendency to dissolve in water but not in fat; some have a tendency to dissolve in fat but not in water.

Each different arrangement of amino acids produces a protein with a different pattern of side-chains on the surface; and each different pattern of side-chains signifies a protein molecule of distinctively different properties.

The number of possible arrangements in a chain made up of hundreds of different amino acids of twenty different varieties is unimaginable. If the chain contained only twenty amino acids, one of each type, the number of arrangements would be a little over 2,400,000,000,000,000,000 (two and a half billion billion).

Imagine the number of different arrangements possible if there were dozens of each kind of amino acid scattered randomly along the chain. I once calculated that the amino acids in a molecule of hemoglobin could be arranged in any of 10^{620} ways. (That's a 1 followed by 620 zeroes.) The number of all the hemoglobin molecules that have existed in all the hemoglobin-containing organisms that have ever lived on the Earth throughout its history is nothing compared to that number. Even the number of all the subatomic particles in the Universe is as nothing compared to that number.

It is not surprising, then, that protein molecules can produce a virtually endless number of surfaces so that it is relatively easy to find one that is well suited to any particular function. That is what makes the chemistry of life so versatile and delicate a thing, and why, starting with the simplest of protein molecules over three billion years ago, life could vary itself into some tens of millions of different species, at least two million of which are now alive.

Some particular proteins are very common and make up a huge mass of material in living things generally. There is, for instance, the keratin found in skin, hair, horns, hooves and feathers; the collagen found in cartilage and connective tissue; the myosin found in muscles; and the hemoglobin found in blood.

If we disregard sheer bulk, however, and simply consider all the different kinds of proteins known, by far the great majority of them are enzymes. There are about 2000 different enzymes that are known and have been studied, and very likely many more that biochemists have not yet isolated. What's more, each enzyme may exist in a number of slightly different varieties.

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Each enzyme has a surface that presents a characteristic shape, electric charge pattern, and chemical tendency. Each one, then, is able to attach itself to only one of a very few closely-related molecules, or even to only one altogether, and to supply the environment necessary to make a rapid chemical change possible for those few, or that one, only. In the absence of that enzyme, that same chemical change could still take place, but only very slowly.

Since the number of such surfaces actually known to exist and be useful are as nothing to the number that can potentially exist, there is ample room for further evolution and for the formation of endless new species.

Even if millions of planets in our Galaxy are riddled with life based on protein molecules, you can see that each planet might have millions of species totally different from those on any other. In fact, the possibility of duplication to the point of familiarity (let alone to interbreeding) is just about zero.

The side-chain pattern is enough to make it possible for a protein molecule to do its job very efficiently, and some enzymes consist of nothing but amino acid chains. The digestive enzymes pepsin and trypsin, which I mentioned in last month's essay, are of this type, Such proteins, made up of amino acids and nothing more, are (as I said at the end of last month's essay) "simple proteins."

It is possible, however, for a protein to include atom groupings that are *not* amino acids within their molecules. Usually, the preponderance of the molecule is indeed made up of amino acids so that we still think of it as a protein, but the non-amino acid portion can nevertheless be important, even crucial, to its functioning.

Enzymes containing groupings that are not amino acids are "conjugated proteins." ("Conjugated" is from a Latin word meaning "joined together" since the non-amino acid grouping is joined together with the amino acid chain.)

There are various types of conjugated proteins, differentiated among themselves by the nature of the non-amino acid grouping. Thus protein molecules joined with nucleic acids are "nucleoproteins"; those joined with fat-like compounds are "lipoproteins"; those joined with sugar-like compounds are "glycoproteins"; those joined with phosphate groups are "phosphoproteins" and so on.

The non-amino acid portion of a protein may be attached rather

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strongly to the amino acid chain, and the attached portion is then known as a "prosthetic group." ("Prosthetic" is from a Greek word meaning "added to." The prosthetic group is added to the protein molecules, you see.)

Sometimes, however, the prosthetic group is but loosely attached to the protein molecules and can be removed by even gentle treatment. This is often true in the case of enzymes, and the easily detached prosthetic group is then called a "coenzyme," for reasons I shall explain shortly.

Even when an enzyme possesses a coenzyme with a structure that is worlds different from that of proteins, it is still the amino acid chain of the enzyme that supplies the necessary surface and determines enzyme specificity (the ability of an enzyme to work with but a single kind of molecule, or, at most, with a very small number). With the proper molecule singled out, the coenzyme can then do the actual work of bringing about the desired chemical change.

As an analogy, you might consider the enzyme a wooden club, which can in itself, with no addition, do a job well — like bashing an enemy over the head to make him see reason. On the other hand, you can stud the head of the club with non-wooden objects — like bone, or stone, or metal — and these will serve to make the bash a more authoritative one. Or you can attach a sharp blade to a wooden club in such as way as to make a knife or an axe out of it.

The handle isn't very useful in itself when it comes to performing a knife's function, and a knife blade all by itself would be difficult to manipulate. The two together, however, do the job marvelously well.

Viewed in that way, the amino-acid portion of an enzyme is the knife handle while the coenzyme is the knife blade, the cutting edge— But, remember, some enzymes (like some clubs) don't need added material to do the job.

In studying enzymes, it is usually desirable to get one as pure as possible. This is not an easy task. A given enzyme exists in very small concentrations in the cells. Present with it are many other enzymes, together with proteins that are not enzymes, to say nothing of other large molecules such as nucleic acids, and small molecules such as those of sugars, fats, individual amino acids, and so on.

A variety of ways of separating proteins from each other and from other large molecules have been developed, and, by picking and choos-

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ing among the fractions to see which one best brings about the reaction in which you are interested, you can gradually select the enzyme you are after, and obtain it in relatively pure and concentrated form.

However, you also want to get out all the small molecules. You want the molecules of enzyme, and nothing else except the water that keeps it dissolved. (Ideally, you don't even want the water, but would be pleased to obtain the enzyme molecules in crystalline form — just enzyme and nothing else at all.)

To get rid of the small molecules, biochemists make use of "semi-permeable membranes." These are thin membranes of the type now used to make sausage casings. They are so thin, and their molecules pack together so loosely that tiny holes are present. These holes are invisible, of course, for they are of molecular dimensions. They are too small, in fact, to allow a large molecule like that of a protein (made up of hundreds, or even thousands, of atoms) to pass through, but small molecules made up of no more than a few dozen atoms *can* get through. That is why the membrane is said to be "semi-permeable"; it is permeable to some molecules, but not to others.

Suppose, then, that a quantity of enzyme solution is put into a bag of semi-permeable membrane, which is then tied off. The bag is suspended in a large beaker of water. Some of the small molecules inside the bag manage, simply by random motion, to find their way through the holes of the membrane out into the water. More and more of the small molecules do, while the large enzyme molecules stay put.

Of course, it is also possible for the small molecules, once in the outside water, to drift back through the holes into the bag of enzyme. Eventually, an equilibrium is set up with the small molecules moving in both directions at equal rates so that there is no further change in concentration. However, since the volume inside the bag is usually considerably smaller than the volume outside the bag, most of the small molecules are outside in the water by the time equilibrium is reached.

If not enough of the small molecules have been removed at equilibrium, you can always place the bag of enzyme solution into a new sample of water and set up a new equilibrium that will bring the concentration of small molecules inside to the bag to a still lower level. In fact, you might even keep water running into the beaker at one end and out the other so that the bag of enzyme solution is always in the presence of new water. Then, virtually all the small molecules are removed.

This process is called "dialysis" (from Greek words meaning "to

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loosen through," because you can view the small molecules as being loosened from their association with the large ones and passed through the membrane).

In 1904, an English biochemist, Arthur Harden (1865-1940), was busily purifying the enzyme, zymase (which I mentioned in last month's essay). He used dialysis as one of his methods. He placed a solution of zymase in a bag of semi-permeable membrane and placed the bag in a beaker of water. In that way, he got out most of the small molecules.

When he did this, however, he discovered, to his astonishment, that the zymase inside the bag did not bring about fermentation any longer. However, if he added the water outside the bag to the zymase solution, the mixture was once again active.

Apparently, the enzyme consisted of two parts that were so loosely bound together that even the gentle action of dialysis was sufficient to separate them. One part was made up of large molecules that could not pass through the membrane, while the other part was made up of small molecules that could, and both together were essential to the process that brought about fermentation.

Furthermore, the zymase inside the bag could be made inactive by heat, indicating it to be a protein. Protein molecules are so large and complex that they are rather rickety, so to speak. The vibration of their different parts, made more intense as the temperature rises, soon destroys their organization, disrupts the molecular surface, and naturally destroys the enzyme activity. Cooling does not, of itself, restore the activity of zymase so inactivated, nor does the addition of the material from the water outside.

The material outside the bag can be brought to a boil, however, and, after it cools to room temperature again, it is still capable of activating the zymase (provided the zymase has not itself been heated). The outside material, then, is not a protein.

The enzyme, Harden concluded, is made up of a protein portion and a non-protein portion. The non-protein portion he called "cozymase," where the prefix "co-" is from Latin, meaning "together," since the small portion works together with the large.

For this finding, and for his other work on fermentation, Harden received a share of the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1929.

The cooperative working of two parts, a large protein and a small non-protein, was eventually found to be characteristic of a number of enzymes (but not all). In the case of those enzymes made up of two

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such parts, the protein portion was called an "apoenzyme," where the prefix "apo-" is from the Greek and implies "off" or "separation." It is the part of the enzyme that remains when the smaller portion is taken off. The non-protein portion is called a "coenzyme," and Harden's cozymase came to be called "Coenzyme I." The two portions together make up the "holoenzyme," where the prefix "holo-" is from the Greek and means "complete" or "entire." Actually, apoenzyme and holoenzyme are rarely used, but coenzyme has become a familiar word in biochemistry.

Sharing the 1929 Nobel Prize with Harden, was the German-Swedish chemist Hans Karl von Euler-Chelpin, who also did noteworthy work on fermentation. Euler-Chelpin went on to tackle the problem of the molecular structure of Coenzyme I. He began by isolating Coenzyme I from yeast, purifying it, and concentrating it over 400-fold. Finally, he had enough for a detailed analysis, which he completed in 1933.

It turned out that Coenzyme I had a strong resemblance to the nucleotide structures that occurred in nucleic acids, but differed from them most notably in containing as part of the structure, a pyridine group made up of a ring of five carbon atoms and one nitrogen atom. It also contained two phosphate groups so that it could be called "diphosphopyridine nucleotide," usually abbreviated "DPN."

Another coenzyme, one that was called Coenzyme II, differed from DPN only in the presence of a third phosphate group so that it was called "triphosphopyridine nucleotide" or "TPN."

There are some two hundred known enzymes that have DPN or TPN as coenzymes. DPN and TPN act to remove a pair of hydrogen atoms from one molecule and transfer them to another. This type of chemical reaction is vital to energy production, and the enzymes bringing it about are called "dehydrogenases."

The protein portion of a dehydrogenase provides the surface on which some one particular molecule finds itself at home. The two hundred different apoenzymes make it possible to deal with two hundred different molecules, and on each one of these the DPN or TPN is the biochemical knife-blade that does the "cutting," then, but that requires the selective apoenzyme "handle" to be a useful tool.

The most interesting thing about DPN and TPN is that the pyridine ring forming part of the molecule, when separated from the rest, proves to be a molecule of nicotinamide, which, as I mentioned three months ago, is the vitamin whose absence from the diet produces the deficiency disease pellagra.

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If nicotinamide is missing from the diet, the body cannot form DPN or TPN, and that means the dehydrogenases begin to halt in their work, and the cells fail to function normally. The symptoms of pellagra are merely a series of signs of this failure.

What's more, as biochemists determined the structure of more and more coenzymes, it turned out that various vitamins were often included in their structures. A vitamin is needed in the diet, then, in order to form a coenzyme that will allow some key enzyme or enzymes to work. Without the vitamin, important reactions will fail within the cells, so that disease and, eventually, death will result.

Since enzymes are catalysts, they are needed in the body in only small quantities. Coenzymes are therefore also needed in only small quantities, and, in consequence, vitamins are needed in only small quantities — but those quantities, however small, are vital to life just the same.

(Some enzymes only work properly in the presence of a metal atom, and that is the reason for the essentiality of trace quantities of certain metals, such as copper, manganese, and molybdenum, in the diet. Again, there are poisons that act very quickly and in small doses to end human life. They work by combining with key enzymes or coenzymes in such a way as to prevent their functioning.)

But why is it that the human body cannot form the nicotinamide portion of Coenzyme I? It can, after all, form the rest of the molecule without trouble.

Some forms of life can form, without exception, *all* the complex molecular structures needed for their functioning, using as their starting materials very simple molecules present in the environment even before any life existed at all.

Plant cells, for instance, start with water, carbon dioxide and certain mineral substances present in the sea and in the soil, and make use of the energy of sunlight, also present from the beginning. From such a start they manufacture all the substances they need.

Microorganisms and animal cells that cannot use sunlight as the ultimate energy source, must obtain energy by oxidizing organic materials that were originally produced by plants. Given this energy, they can start with relatively simple materials and build up the complicated molecules they need. Nevertheless, you can see that they depend on the plant world for energy and, therefore, for life.

(Some few microorganisms are "chemosynthetic" and can obtain

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energy by taking advantage of chemical reactions that do not involve organic substances.)

Suppose that a particular molecule is needed by an organism in small quantities and can be absorbed as such from the food it eats. The organism might lose the ability to make the molecule and come to depend on dietary supplies. The more advanced and complex an animal, the more likely it is to do this.

Why should that be? My own feeling is that the more complex an organism, the more enzymes are needed to make everything possible. For instance, animals have muscles and nerves, which plants don't have, and must make use of enzyme-mediated reactions that plants can do without. Room must be made for the various enzymes that control myriads of reactions in complex organisms that simple ones need not deal with.

If then there are some reactions that are required to only a very small extent, why not eliminate them? Let the diet take care of that and thus leave room for other things. (In fact, you might argue that animal cells, by doing without the complex machinery required for photosynthesis, and eating plant cells instead so as to get energy from their diet rather than from the sun, make room for the more complex animal functions.)

Naturally, some things can't be skimped on. If a particular small molecule is needed in quantity, the diet cannot be sufficiently depended on to supply those quantities. It would be too great a risk to take. It is only when small quantities are needed that the risk is reasonable.

Thus, of the twenty amino acids found in proteins generally, the human body can build up twelve from fragments of other molecules that it finds in its food. If the diet is short in one or another of those twelve, the body can make that up from its own resources, at the expense of maintaining the battery of enzymes that make it possible.

The remaining eight of the amino acids cannot be formed by the human body, however, and must be found in sufficient quantity in the diet. These eight are therefore known as the "essential amino acids," not because they are more essential than the others to the body's workings, but because they are essential components of the diet, if deficiency disease, and death, is to be avoided.

Why those eight? Because they are the eight needed in least quantity so that it is safer to gamble on those than on the rest.

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As it happens, the vitamins contain atom combinations that do not occur elsewhere in the body. The body makes use of a nicotinamide grouping of atoms only in Coenzymes I and II and nowhere else. Why maintain enzymes for the synthesis of such a grouping? Get it instead by eating some less complex organism who can afford to maintain the necessary enzyme investment.

How does the body know what substances it can safely gamble on finding in the diet and what substances it cannot? It doesn't.

Every once in a while, organisms are born without a particular enzyme or other, as a result of a random mutation. If that enzyme lack deprives it of the ability to make substances it cannot depend on its diet to supply in adequate quantities it quickly dies. If the enzyme that is lacking happens to control the formation of something needed only in traces, however, the organism may get it from its diet and will then continue to live. It may even benefit as other chemical abilities find room to flourish.

Naturally, the purchase of more efficient complexities is at the price of having to be more careful with the diet than we would otherwise have to be, but apparently the benefit is cheap at the price. Most animals, with their diet restricted to what they can find in nature, are guided by their instincts and their taste buds to eat that which will supply them with what they need.

Human beings, on the other hand, have the ability to fool around with their food, refining items to keep those parts that taste best or keep best and dumping the rest. They indulge in boiling, frying, roasting, salting, drying, sugaring and other things that make food taste better or keep longer — and, in recent years, the addition of myriads of chemicals. This all tends to make it riskier to depend on diet to supply the substances we can't make ourselves and must have.

On the other hand, we now have synthetic vitamins, mineral pills and so on. We may still die of deficiency diseases out of the perversity of our tastes, or out of the sheer insufficiency of the quantity and variety of food that our surroundings or our economic status will allow us. But at least we know enough now to avoid such a fate if we are both fortunate and rational.

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Sometimes it is very hard to remember the gold of childhood when magic was real and the world was much busier with the comings and goings of fairy folk than with mere people. Gael Baudino ("The Shadow of the Starlight," April 1985) reminds us of that time in "The Persistence of Memory." Perhaps the magic of childhood was more real than we now think?

The Persistence of Memory

BY
GAEL BAUDINO

Barbara knew before she opened the kitchen drawer that the plane tickets would not be there. The moment her hand touched the pull, she felt the sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach that had nothing to do with her pregnancy. Nonetheless, phone against one ear and "Sesame Street" dinning in the other, she rummaged among the balls of string, out-of-date catalogs, paper clips, thumbtacks, and miscellaneous odds and ends.

"Honey," she said into the phone, "I can't find them."

"Barb, I gave them to you the other day after I got home from work. I asked you to put them away."

"I did," she said, still rummaging. "I put them in the drawer."

She knew what he was thinking. Forgetting again. Always forgetting everything. If it was not plane tickets, it was phone bills, purses, groceries, or, perish the thought, Stacie.

In the other room, Stacie shrieked at something her imaginary playmate did. No, she thought, never Stacie, at least.

"I've got to be on the Houston plane this afternoon, Barb. Can't miss it. We're discussing the Shuttle crash."

"Frank," she said, "I'm sorry. I put them in the drawer. You watched me put them there." She was trying not to be plaintive, but it was not working. She sounded like a whiny housewife even to her own ears, and she did not like it.

"Yeah, I watched. And when I wasn't watching, you probably put them somewhere else that you thought was safer. Now, where?"

The sinking feeling persisted. "I don't remember."

The silence on the other end of

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the line lengthened. She could visualize him at his desk, shirt sleeves rolled up and, she fancied, pencil behind his ear. He would be half buried in computer printout, and his glasses would be off his face and in one hand. He would be waving them about in exasperation.

"Can you get the company to get you another ticket, honey?" she said in a small voice.

"I hope so. Just . . . forget it. I'll get down to Houston somehow." He forced a laugh. "I suppose I should have thought about them before I left for work. It'll make the day exciting."

"You'll be back—"

"Tomorrow evening. Call you tonight."

"Dylbok!" Stacie shrieked. "Put that down!"

"*Six,*" declaimed the television. *"Six huge wagon wheels!"*

"I . . . I love you, Frank."

"Love you, too . . . my dear, forgetful wife." He said words without anger and even with a bit of a laugh, but she hung up with her eyes slightly moist. Was she stupid? She did not think so. She had graduated high school near the top of her class, and surely settling down and having a family did not automatically condemn one to idiocy, regardless of what the libbers said.

She ran a hand back through her blonde hair and then let it come to rest on her belly. Maybe she was getting complacent, fat and happy with one kid and another on the way. It was her sixth month, far enough along to be comfortable with the pregnancy, but not so far that she felt like a blimp. It could have been an idyllic existence . . . if she did not forget everything.

Staring at the phone, she mumbled: "I'll have to write myself a note to remind myself to remember to appreciate all of this someday. Unless I forget to write the note."

Stacie came in. "Mommy . . . where is my Strawberry Shortcake doll?"

"Uh. . . ."

"Dylbok says you put it away for me."

"Yeah, I did. I guess I forgot where I put it."

Three-year-olds were not as understanding about such things as husbands were.

She did not forget to fix something special for dinner the following night, nor did Frank forget to comment on her thoughtfulness. He sat at the table, his empty plate and his glasses both pushed back and Stacie crawling all over him. "So, as far as the techs could tell, " he said, "the *Columbia* crashed because someone forgot to take a ten-cent metal retaining clamp off a wire."

Barbara rose and began clearing the table. "It's hard to believe that anything costs only ten cents these days."

"Well, it probably *was* a little more

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than ten cents, but you got the idea. Thank God no one was hurt."

She turned on the water and scraped the plates before loading the dishwasher. "Honey, I thought they had checklists for things like that."

"Put it down, Stacie, it's full." Frank pried a glass out of his daughters's tiny hand. "Checklists," he answered, "are going to work only if people remember to use them. Someone forgot. That's all. Just forgot."

Barbara stopped scraping. "Forgot?"

"Yeah. Of all the stupid things to do. Billions of dollars turned into bent beer cans because some idiot—" He looked up and saw that she was crying. "Honey . . . Barb. . ." He set Stacie down. "Why don't you play with Dylbok, Stacie?"

Tears were streaking down her face by the time he was at her side, and he put his arms around her. "Honey I'm sorry. Space Shuttles are one thing . . . tickets are another. You've got your hands full here, and I shouldn't expect—"

"Why the hell not?" she sobbed. "You should expect your wife to act like an intelligent adult instead of a stupid brood sow that can't remember her own name." She choked. She could not even wipe her eyes: her hands were greasy, and she felt ridiculous and helpless as Frank tore off a paper towel and dried her face, then cleaned up her streaked mascara.

"My wife," he said seriously, "is not a brood sow. She's doing the most important work in the world. It's called making people. It takes time . . . and effort. And . . . and I'm sorry about my words."

"Yeah." She rinsed her hands and dried them. "I'll be O.K. I just feel like an idiot. I've never had a good memory, and it's been getting worse these days. I feel like I'm wandering around in a fog all the time."

Frank was concerned. "Are you eating O.K.? Have you seen the midwife?"

"I'm fine. Laura agrees. My mind's just going, that's all."

"If your memory were better, would you feel better?"

"A lot. And you wouldn't miss your planes, either."

"Come on. I want to show you something."

He took her up into the bedroom where he had left his briefcase. "This is really interesting. Turns out that about a year ago, Houston hired the Rand Corporation to do a study regarding disasters of various kinds. We got the report two days before the *Columbia* crashed. Turns out that a sizable percentage of problems are caused by memory lapses. And the people that have lapses report the same thing that you do: a foggy feeling."

She sat down on the bed and worked her fingers in the folds of her apron. This was supposed to make her feel better?

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He noticed her look. "Hear me out. Rand didn't stop at finding the problem: they found a partial cure. Look." He sat down beside her and opened a folder of typewritten pages. "You've heard of learning disabilities? The people who deal with that kind of thing have found that certain parts of the brain can affect certain other parts in really bizarre ways. For instance, doing particular physical exercises can overcome reading problems. It's true."

The loose papers were threatening to spill all over the floor, but she managed to hold onto them. "Frank, I can read fine."

"Ah! But this applies to more than reading. This isn't classified, so I don't see any reason you can't benefit from it. We're going to teach everyone in the space program to have really super fantastic memories. Presto! No more disasters!"

The program that Rand had developed was a very simple one, a series of exercises involving printed symbols and arm movements that one did before bed each night. Frank showed her an eight-by-ten card with a red square, a green rectangle, and a white line on a black background. The arrangement was quite asymmetrical, and made Barbara dizzy when she stared at it. "You're sure this will help?"

"It's worth a try, isn't it?"

She pondered, and in the silence she heard dripping. Letting the pages fall to the floor, she raced downstairs to the kitchen, where she had forgotten to turn off the water in the sink.

For the first three weeks of the exercises, she noticed nothing. She slept more soundly, that was all, and she woke refreshed and alert, but since she lost two lipsticks and her checkbook during the third week, she could not see that the Rand Corporation was helping her much.

She told Frank as much that weekend while she was fixing dinner and he was repairing the toaster.

"Give it time," he said. "We're getting about the same results from the test group down in Houston."

"What about you?"

"Me? Oh, I'm not doing them. I don't have any trouble with my memory." He poked into the toaster with a screwdriver. "There it is. Spade lug broke. Have to call the store and see if they have this size." He went to the telephone and began leafing through the yellow pages.

"It's 344-5707," said Barbara without looking up from the cutting board.

"Huh? Did you just look?"

"Nah. You looked it up for the door hinges, remember?"

He dialed the number and found that the part was in stock. When he hung up, he was grinning. "I think it's working, Barb. The door hinges were two weeks ago."

She paused with the knife half

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through a tomato. "I . . . I guess so. I just . . . remembered it."

"It's totally natural, see? In a little while you'll be remembering all sorts of things."

Stacie ran in, laughing. Frank swung her up into his arms. "My little girl want to go to the hardware store with me?"

"Can Dylbok come, too?"

"Dylbok? Oh! Sure he can come." He laughed and hugged her.

Barbara started in on the lettuce. "She takes him pretty seriously," she said.

"I think we all have invisible playmates at her age," said Frank. "I think we forget to believe in them as we get older. It's kind of sad."

He pulled on his coat and left with Stacie. They would be back in plenty of time for dinner. Barbara turned off the television and enjoyed the silence left behind.

As she was walking back to the kitchen, though, she noticed something on the carpet. Bending over, she plucked at it, came up with a handful of what looked like feathers. They were attractive, fairly large, and shot with gold. Bright, metallic gold.

"Odd," she murmured. "What's she been playing with?"

The back door slammed, and she poked her head into the kitchen. But there was no one there.

She was going to show the feathers to Frank when he came home, but she misplaced them. No, not exactly misplaced. She remembered precisely where she had put them, but they were no longer there. Not wanting to call attention to her fallibility, she did not mention them at all.

Then, Wednesday morning, everything changed.

She woke up that morning clear and alert, as though never before in her life had she been truly awake. She swung open the bedroom window and took in a deep lungful of air. The scent of the flowers on the sill was intoxicating. The colors were wonderful.

Smiling softly, she got Frank off to work right on schedule, even remembering the precise location of his wallet — which he had forgotten — and reminding him that the gas tank needed filling. When she turned away from waving good-bye, she noticed the feathers on the counter, exactly where she remembered putting them.

She shook her head to clear it, but it was already clear. Wonderfully clear. Once again she picked up the feathers, and once again she noticed their beauty and the oddity of the gold threads that wove through them.

In the other room, above the sound of "Nickelodeon," came Stacie's laughter and a noise not unlike a sock filled with custard hitting the carpeted floor. Barbara dropped the feathers and ran into the living room.

"Stacie?"

The child was sitting in front of the television, and the room did not

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seem to be disturbed in the slightest. "Hi, Mommy."

"What was that sound?"

"Dylbok."

"Come on, honey . . . what was it?"

Stacie looked offended in the manner that only three-year-olds can achieve. "That," she said, "was Dylbok."

"O.K." The room seemed undisturbed, but she gave it another look. Her eyes were on the sofa just in time to see something about the size of a large cat scurry behind it. She pounced as quickly as seven months would let her, but she found nothing behind the sofa, and it was too low to the ground for the animal to have hidden beneath it.

"Stacie, did you see something by the sofa?"

"Yes," she said. "That was Dylbok."

She sat down on the floor beside her daughter and put her arms about her. "Dylbok?"

"Dylbok."

"Are you sure the neighbor's cat didn't get in?"

Stacie looked even more offended. "That was Dylbok."

Barbara glanced around the room once more. Nothing. "O.K., honey. I'll be in the kitchen."

The feathers were still there, and she took them over to the table to look at them while she had her coffee. They were lovely things, mixtures of gold and green and brown and blue, and they glittered prismatically in the morning sun. They were like nothing she had ever seen before. She was about to take them to Stacie and ask if they belonged to Dylbok when the sock filled with custard struck again, immediately behind her.

She jumped and turned around. There on the floor in front of the dishwasher was a creature about the size of a large cat, but, like the feathers, it was like nothing she had ever seen before, save in storybooks — or maybe in dreams. The body was unmistakably that of a miniature lion, and just as definitely the front feet, head, and wings rightly belonged to an eagle.

The creature was sprawled half on one side, and as she watched, he cleared his throat and picked himself up. "Good morning." He sounded embarrassed.

Barbara stared blankly for a moment. Her head was clear. Too clear. It would have been preferable had it been fuzzy. She could have put the creature down to hallucination. "Who . . . who are you?" she blurted.

"I am called Dylbok." He clacked his beak and arranged several feathers on a mussed wing. "I am a Gryphon."

There did not seem to be much room for disagreement.

Barbara stared. Dylbok cleared his throat again, a small noise like a file on sheet metal, and leaped into the air, coming to rest after a moment on the kitchen table in front of her. He landed precisely. "Better," he said, preening at a wing. "Stacie pulled out

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a number of my feathers the other day, and I have been somewhat clumsy ever since then. Of course she meant no harm."

His voice was matter-of-fact, and though it was raspy, it seemed kind enough. Barbara was uncertain whether she should be afraid or not. Golden eyes sparkled at her. "What . . . what are you doing here?" she asked.

"I live here."

"You certainly do not."

"Oh, but I certainly do. I am Stacie's imaginary playmate. Do you not *remember*?" The Gryphon waggled large bushy eyebrows at her on the last word.

"Remember? Remember what?"

He sat back and regarded her. " A great deal, now. You have seen me a thousand times before in your house, but you forgot me even as you saw . . . because I willed it so. The Rand exercises you have been doing are blocking my best efforts. You remember me now. I cannot send you to oblivion as I used to." There was a piece of toast left in the rack, and he eyed it. "May I?"

"Uh . . . sure. Do you want butter?"

"No, thank you. Butter disagrees with me." He picked up the toast in a front claw and began nibbling at it daintily. "Actually," he said between bites, "I am not the first of my kind to become known. It will be more difficult for you, though— especially when you can see the others."

"What others?" Barbara laid a protective hand on her belly, looked around the room as though she might suddenly be inundated by Gryphons.

Dylbok took another bite, swallowed. "Do you think that I am the only mythical creature in the world? Nay, not so. Univorns. Sprites. Gnomes. Knocky-Bohs. Hippogriffs. Dragons. . . ."

"I'm supposed to see *them,* too?" she said fearfully.

"Given time, my lady. If you keep up with the Rand exercises. Some use more power than I to make you forget, but you will win in the end." He finished the toast. "May I please have some coffee?"

"Sure." She got up automatically and went to the carafe. "I'm not sure at all about this, Dylbok. Maybe I'm losing my mind. Cream or sugar?"

"Black," he said, and added softly: "And you are not losing your mind. It is more that you are finding it."

She brought him a cup, and he nodded his thanks.

"Am . . . am I supposed to be afraid of you?" she asked. "Are you dangerous?"

The golden eyes sparkled at her again. Dylbok drank, dipping his beak and throwing his head back to let the liquid run down his throat. "Would I be allowed to touch a child if I were a threat?"

"It works that way with human beings."

"We follow more binding rules."

"What about Frank? Can he see you, too?"

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Dylbok made a *kit-kit* sound through his nostrils that Barbara interpreted as laughter. "Not unless he does the exercises." He drank again. "But, of course Frank does not have any trouble with his memory. *Kit-kit.*"

So it began. Dylbok became — or rather, continued to be — a part of the household. Many of Stacie's strange games now became totally intelligible to Barbara as she, in a sense, entered her daughter's world.

On the way to the market, Dylbok would be sprawled on the dashboard, lounging lazily in the sun, occasionally warning Barbara about some pending idiotic maneuver on the part of another driver. He told curious stories that made her laugh, although she did not understand why, and he joined her in laughter, his *kit-kit* chattering like a small pneumatic drill. On Tuesday afternoons the three of them played Monopoly according to Stacie's curious rules by which no one ever lost. Still, Barbara suspected Dylbok of influencing the girl's dice rolls so that, if no one lost, Stacie won the most.

And, true to the Gryphon's words, Barbara saw more. There were Unicorns in the park, fleet-footed creatures of moonlight and frost that cavorted in the foundations and chased one another through the flower beds without marring a petal. Dylbok introduced her to the Gnome that lived at the base of the large oak, a genial old fellow with a big plumed hat that he doffed thereafter whenever he saw her. There was the Nixie that lived in the lake. And the Dragon that inhabited the forest outside of town, and the Pegasus that sometimes flew over the downtown skyline at sunset, the reddening light glinting off her wings like coruscating fire.

It was hard, sometimes, to come back from her outings and settle down to making a pot roast for Frank. She did not begrudge him his dinner, but the fact that she could not talk to him about Dylbok or the others was a frustration. He would tell her about his work, about the programs he was writing, about what the office gossip was, and her mind would be racing with the Pegasus across the sky, or talking with the Dragon, or remembering the cheery words of the Gnome. She had seen the playmates of other children, too, had talked to them, and she knew her eyes were shining as bright as a three-year-old's. But she said nothing. Once, she ventured an observation about remembering imaginary playmates: Wouldn't it be interesting?

Frank regarded her as though she had spouted gibberish. "Honey," he said calmly. "Memory works only when there's something to remember. Imagination is imagination. Are you still doing those exercises?"

"Of course." She went back to slicing onions. Dylbok looked at her

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from the top of the refrigerator and shook his head. Barbara shrugged.

"I'm wondering if you shouldn't stop," Frank continued. "We're having some problems with the test group in Houston. They're getting a little daft. The psychologists are trying to figure it out."

"I don't feel daft," said Barbara. In truth, she felt joyous. Ecstatic. But she said nothing about that.

"Still," said Frank, "better quit."

Barbara changed the subject. Dylbok shook his head in despair. That night, as she was soaking in the bathtub, her inhabited belly protruding above the water like a warm mountain, Dylbok squeezed through the half-open door and perched on the toilet seat. Barbara's glance flicked to the door, and the Gryphon merely looked at it and it closed. "Are you going to stop the exercises?" he said.

"What would happen if I did? Would I lose you?"

"To be honest, my lady, I do not know. This sort of thing has not happened before. Your ability may be permanently altered. And then again. . . ."

She dried her hand, reached out and touched him lightly. "I don't want to lose you, Dylbok. I don't want to lose anyone."

The golden eyes glittered. "We have also become rather fond of you," he said. "And I have spoken with acquaintances in Houston. They enjoy their human friends."

A shimmer appeared between her feet and resolved itself into a silver-haired head with deep brown eyes. Barbara jumped.

"Your child is well, Lady," said the head. "A bonny girl she'll be."

"What do you want, Nix?" Dylbok demanded.

"Just a visit, Master." The head smiled. "No mischief for our friends. We all care for the mother." It winked. "Will you crack the drain for a moment, Lady?"

Chuckling, Barbara lifted the lever with her toe, and the Nix dived for the drain. When they were alone again, the Gryphon preened a wing. "I daresay this could become tedious for you."

"Not at all." Barbara leaned back. "I'm keeping on with the exercises."

The Gryphon sprang to the edge of the tub and laid his head softly against hers. "Thank you," he whispered.

That night, she could not find the eight-by-ten card. She wondered if she had mislaid it, but she smiled and shook her head ruefully as she got down on her hands and knees and searched under the nightstand. No, she remembered exactly where she had left it.

"Lose something, honey?" said Frank as he donned his pajamas.

"Uh, the Rand card," she said.

He looked at her patiently. "I told you I didn't want you doing those exercises anymore. The group down in

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Houston is getting pretty weird."

Dylbok spoke up from the bed. "Some have been indiscreet."

"Idiots," said Barbara without thinking.

"Well, maybe so," said Frank, who had not heard the Gryphon, "but we're calling in all the materials so we can get a handle on this. Don't do the exercises. I don't need my wife flipping out on me."

Barbara got slowly to her feet, eight months of baby making her less than graceful. "I'm not flipping out on you, Frank. I just want to keep up with the exercises. I like the results. When was the last time I lost your plane tickets?"

He glared at her, exasperated. "I know: you know exactly where everything is now. I think you're making *me* daft."

"You're just jealous. Why don't you do the exercises? You can take notes and submit them to Rand."

"*I* don't have problems with my memory."

"Then *you* can be a nice control group of one and just concern yourself with the bizarre effects."

"What bizarre effects?"

Barbara colored, realizing her tongue had slipped. "Uh . . . nothing."

"Nothing? Bull! What's going on?"

"I said: Nothing." She turned away from him and sat down heavily on the bed, nearly squashing Dylbok. The Gryphon scurried to the foot and sighed.

Frank stood, hands on hips, sizing her up. After a minute he dropped his shoulders. "All right. I'll find out about the bizarre effects myself." He went to his briefcase, took out the card, and went through the exercises slowly, as one unpracticed. When he was through, he shook his head and crawled into bed. "Those things make you sleepy," he murmured. "Stay away from them, Barb." With that, he was asleep.

He had locked the card in his briefcase when he had finished the exercises, and Barbara did not know the combination. She looked helplessly at Dylbok. "What do I do now?"

"You remember the exercises, do you not?"

"But the card. . . ."

"You remember the card, do you not?"

For a moment she sat on the bed, frozen with the realization. Of course she did. Every detail of the card was etched in her memory. She simply closed her eyes and imagined that she held it in her hand as she moved. When she finished, she felt a familiar tingling in the back of her mind, and she was sleepy.

"Dylbok," she murmured, crawling into bed. "Thanks. Thanks a lot. I love you."

Frank stirred. "Mmmph. Love you, too, Barb."

Dylbok eyed him, then shifted his golden gaze to Barbara. "And I, you. Dear lady."

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Frank was in no better a mood the next morning. He sulked through breakfast. His pancakes and eggs were mostly untouched when he got up from the table.

"Will you just level with me? " he demanded.

"I don't have anything to say, Frank," she said. "Do the exercises and find out for yourself."

"We're going to be talking about this in Houston this afternoon," he said as he felt through his pockets. "Damn. . . . Where are those tickets?"

"In your briefcase," Barbara said softly.

His mouth tightened and he opened the case, pulled out the tickets, and stuffed them in his coat. "See what I mean? You're making me crazy. I preferred you when you forgot everything." He left without kissing her, slamming the door behind him.

Barbara looked after him a moment. "*I* didn't." She lifted her cup of coffee to her lips, but her hand was shaking.

Dylbok landed carefully on the table beside her. "Doubtless all will be well when he can see us. In a month."

"Dylbok, I'm due in a month. I don't want it to be like this."

The Gryphon was silent.

Frank returned from Houston the following evening with very little to talk about regarding the Rand exercises. It appeared to Barbara that if some among the test group had been indiscreet, they had now regained their tact and were saying nothing about their preternatural friends. Frank could offer no more than some vagaries about changed behavior and odd senses of humor. It sounded like an accusation to Barbara.

The last month was the hardest. She was thoroughly tired of being pregnant, and she snapped at him more than she might have. In response, Frank said nothing more about the exercises, but continued to do them before bed, locking the card in his brief case before sleep took him. Barbara continued to do the exercises herself . . . with the imaginary card. Her perceptions continued undiminished; in fact, she suspected that they were continuing to develop. In the morning she could look out the kitchen and see Nymphs and Devas singing in the maple trees along the street, and one evening she thought she saw the great Dragon in flight, taking a lazy turn around Civic Center and through the airport traffic pattern.

Her time drew closer, and her midwife was pleased. "You're fine. You're perfect," she said as Barbara was putting on her shoes. "I'd say next Tuesday. Can't be sure, but I'd bet on it. And I'd say it's a boy."

"It's a girl," Barbara said softly, and Dylbok nodded from the counter.

"What tells you that?" said the midwife, smiling.

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"A Nixie told me."

"Oh, to be sure," said the midwife. But she was Irish, and so Barbara caught the midwife staring after her as she and Dylbok went down the corridor to the front desk.

The weather turned the next week, the last of the autumn yielding finally to winter. It snowed lightly on Friday, just enough to snarl traffic and put Frank in a foul mood when he got home.

They ate dinner in silence. Frank was still doing the exercises, Barbara knew, but they did not seem to be having any effect. Maybe he was doing them wrong. The baby was stirring within her, and kicked hard, making Barbara jump. Dylbok glanced at her from where he was playing with Stacie. "I'm O.K.," she said, half to Frank, half to the Gryphon. "She's a kicker."

"You saw Laura?"

"She says Tuesday. I hope the weather holds."

"I hope it's not Tuesday," said Frank as he half-rose and peered out the window at the falling snow. "I'm going to be in Houston until Wednesday. This memory thing. The test group is still acting oddly. We're wondering if the effects are reversible. We're tending toward junking the whole thing."

"Have you . . . noticed anything?"

He turned to her, his mouth tight. "Nothing. I think I'm too stable to go freaking out. How are you? I haven't noticed too much recently."

"You haven't spoken much to me recently." Barbara kept a hand on her belly, feeling the movements of the infant. *Hush,* she thought. *Be easy. You'll be out soon.*

"I thought it was the other way around," said Frank.

The Gryphon spoke. "Actually," he said, "you're both acting like fools. Be easy yourself, Barbara."

"Hmmm." She glanced at Dylbok, then at her husband. "I'm sorry, Frank."

"You going to tell me what's going on now?"

"I don't have anything to tell."

The weekend went by. Barbara tried to be conciliatory, but had no success, and the weather reports were making her uneasy. A large storm was sledgehammering Washington and Oregon, and it was due in her part of the country in a few days. She was mostly worried about Frank flying in such weather, but a part of her was concerned with traveling to the birth center in the teeth of a blizzard.

Frank left Sunday, with the weather cold but clear. Barbara noticed that he knew where his tickets were this time, and she took it for a good omen.

But the weather turned around, and by Monday afternoon, snow was falling thick and fast, and the weather reports were talking about emergencies and twenty-four inches in twenty-four hours. Barbara put Stacie to bed

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that night and sat up for a cup of tea with Dylbok. "Are you well?" said the Gryphon.

"How are you at home births, Dylbok?"

"Of my own kind, my lady, I am very good. But humans. . . ."

She did her exercises before bed and tried to believe that what her instincts told her was not true. Dylbok watched, golden-eyed.

She awoke. The clock said three in the morning and her belly said *now*. "Oh, Dylbok!" she cried. "It's happening!"

"Call the birth center," said the Gryphon calmly. "Breathe evenly. You'll be fine."

Barbara was looking out the window, dismayed. The snow had built up quickly: she estimated that there was a foot and a half on the ground, and large flakes, driven by a bitter north wind, were adding to it.

"Call the birth center," said Dylbok. "If there's anyone there, tell them you are coming in."

"How? I don't have a four-by-four."

"Just tell them. I have things to attend to." He left the room, and she heard the door slam a moment after.

Hands shaking, she dialed the number. The answering service told her it was impossible to reach the birth rooms, that she should call the fire department to see if a paramedic could get to her.

"Is there anyone at the birth rooms?"

"Laura is there, snowed in."

"Tell her I'm on my way."

"But you can't—"

"I have it on good authority. Just tell her." She hung up wishing she felt more sure of herself than she did.

While she waited for Dylbok to return, she timed contractions. Good and regular. She still had some hours of labor before her, but when she flicked on the weather radio, she learned that the blizzard was not going to abate in less than a half day. She tried to call Frank. The lines were down.

"Oh, God. . . ." She was starting to dial the number for the paramedics, when suddenly the Gryphon was there in a flurry of wings and gold.

"Hurry!" he commanded. "Wake Stacie and bundle the both of you up. We must leave. Now!"

She stared at him for a moment, then waddled down the hall. "Stacie! The baby's coming, dear! We have to go see Laura!"

They were dressed in a few minutes, and Barbara was still zipping one of Frank's coats over her belly as Dylbok led them downstairs to the kitchen.

"How are we getting there, Dylbok?" she was saying. "There's a blizzard outside. . . haven't you noticed? And—oh!"

She stood in the doorway, stricken immobile by the sight of the Pegasus

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standing on the linoleum tile, her great wings folded gracefully at her sides, snow melting from her and dripping in small puddles at her feet.

"Blessings upon you on this day, Mother," said the Pegasus. "I am Amarantha. If you would, I will bear you and your daughters." Her voice was like moonbeams, soft and silvery, and violet eyes held Barbara's own. Stacie ran to Amarantha and reached up to her. The Pegasus nuzzled her, then looked at Barbara meaningfully.

"I. . . ." She looked at Dylbok, then at Pegasus. "Yes . . . I'll come. Thank you."

They went outside, into the driving wind. Amarantha lifted her wings, and the storm seemed to abate around her. She knelt, and Barbara scrambled onto her back and took Stacie up before her. Then, with a bound, Amarantha was aloft, wings beating powerfully against the storm, head thrown back in the ecstasy of flight. She sang, and the song was one of birth and beginnings, of sunrise and good weather.

They broke through the clouds a few minutes later, and the full moon turned the storm below them to fantasy and light.

Amarantha went forward mightily, and Stacie laughed, and Barbara found that she also was laughing with sheer delight. Ahead, guiding them, was Dylbok, his feathers and fur ashimmer in the moonlight.

And Barbara realized that they had been joined by others. Other Gryphons were there, and Devas and Sprites, and tiny Dragons with emerald scales and breath like rubies in sunlight. They clustered close around Barbara and Stacie, and on those faces that could, she saw smiles.

Together they swept down into the clouds again, Dylbok still guiding. The wind came, but Amarantha stilled it around her. Below, the birth center parking lot came into view, buried and almost unrecognizable. Amarantha landed just by the big double doors in the shelter of a brick wall. "Peace to you, Barbara," she said. "Enter, and may your time be quick and easy."

Barbara kissed the white neck, and Dylbok hustled her inside.

"If only Frank were here," she murmured. "We've always wanted to be together for these. He was here for Stacie. . . ."

"Barbara!" cried the midwife. "How the hell did you get here?"

She let her coat fall to the floor. "You wouldn't believe me, Laura. Just get me ready. I'm going to have my second daughter." Stacie clapped her hands.

If the midwife heard the chorus of silvery cheers from outside the doors, she gave no sign. But she smiled.

The hours passed, her contractions came more swiftly. An hour or two past dawn, Laura shook her head.

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"It's amazing. This is going to take no time at all. Another hour maybe."

"I've had the blessing of the Pegasus," Barbara murmured. The birth was easier than her first, and perhaps it was indeed going to take no time at all, but it still hurt, and she was trying to keep track of breathing, pushing, and bracing herself. She was getting fuddled. "I should have called Frank before I left. Where is Dylbok?"

"Dylbok?" Laura looked at her. "Who's Dylbok?"

"Oh . . . a friend of the family. . . ." Another contraction. The pain increased. Not intolerable. Not quite.

Laura's eyes widened. "You're in transition. Only twenty more contractions."

"It hurts," said Barbara between clenched teeth.

"Only twenty contractions," Laura said soothingly. "You can stand *anything* for twenty contractions."

"That's what you said three years ago for Stacie."

"I was right, wasn't I?"

"I wish Frank was here."

"Honey, I'm surprised that *you're* here, what with this blizzard."

"Where is Dylbok?"

"Who's Dylbok?"

Even through the haze of pain, Barbara felt a change, as though there was something outside the birth room window. The blinds were drawn, and she could not see, but she felt it. It was big, and powerful, and undaunted by the blizzard.

Another contraction. "Push," said Laura.

"Roger, wilco," she gritted.

Footsteps in the hall outside. The door suddenly swung open and Frank exploded into the room. "Barbara!"

Laura looked blank. "How . . . ?"

"Never mind how. How is Barbara?"

"Transition, Frank," she said with some pride. "Hold me. Like you did with Stacie."

Then he was on the bed behind her, his arms about her, and she smiled in spite of the pain. She looked back at him and saw that his eyes were shining like a three-year-old's.

"How, Frank?" she whispered.

He glanced at the window. "Open the blinds, Laura."

They were electric, and Laura hit the foot switch. On the other side of the glass, Barbara saw it. Big. Immense. The snowflakes seemed to stay away from it, and the emerald scales glinted in the spill of light from the room. Large eyes that seemed to reach back into infinity watched her calmly.

"Dragon express," he whispered. "Direct from Houston." He laughed, his eyes still shining. "Dylbok showed up and warned me, but I didn't have much time. I didn't even check out of the hotel. I don't argue with Dragons."

Another contraction. "So you see them?"

He kissed her. "All of them. And you know . . . oddly enough . . . I don't feel a bit daft."

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The baby came quickly after that, nearly catching the midwife off guard. "I thought you said twenty," said Barbara.

The child was in her arms then, and matters of number, of twenty or ten or even one or two, were forgotten. She held her daughter close, letting her nurse, and looked toward the window, where faces of various kinds and sizes pressed against the glass. One with deep violet eyes caught her gaze. She heard in her mind: *Blessings upon you this day.*

"We'll call her. . . ." She looked at Frank. "We'll call her Amarantha."

"Better that than Dylbok," said the Gryphon from the counter.

And once again there was a chorus of silvery cheers in the air. And the midwife smiled.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 38

In the June issue, we asked readers to take the opening sentences of three to seven SF works and arrange them to make the opening paragraph(s) of another, nonexistent story — the more ridiculuous the better.

Some *very* strange results on this one The dominant theme of the entries was. . . cannibalism. Go figure.

FIRST PRIZE

SORRY MOM

The regular early morning yell of horror was the sound of Arthur Dent waking up and suddenly remembering where he was. He did not want to be the father of a small blue pyramid. Who was to blame?

It was inevitable they should marry The form of the habit she had become still drove him to one side of the bed. "Good God in heaven, what's that?"

Dragon's breath!

1 Douglas Adams, *Life, the Universe and Everything,* 2. Ray Bradbury, *Tomorrow's Child,* 3. Arthur Clarke, *Rescue Party,* 4. Harlan Ellison, *Eyes of Dust,* 5. Harlan Ellison, *Lonely Ache,* 6. Ray Bradbury, *The Cold Wind and The Warm,* 7. Harlan Ellison, *World of the Myth.*

—Abigail F. Strichartz
Amherst, NY

SECOND PRIZE

SACRIFICIAL LAMB

Limp, the body of Gorrister hung from the pink palette; unsupported — hanging high above us in the computer chamber; and it did not shiver in the chill, oily breeze that blew eternally through the main cavern.

The Bishop of Rome, the Head of the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, the Vicar of Christ on Earth — in short, the Pope — brushed a cockroach from the filth-encrusted wooden table, took a sip of the raw red wine, and resumed his discourse. Now that I'm a cranky, constipated old man I can afford to say that the younger generation of scientists makes me sick to my stomach. Today you liquidated about 50,000 Eaters in Section A. and now you are spending an uneasy night.

There are always those who ask, what is it all about? Un and Sub, the giants, are grinding him for bread.

1. Harlan Ellison, *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream,* 2. Anthony Boucher, *The Quest for Saint Acquin,* 3. C. M. Kornbluth, *Gomez,* 4. Robert Silverberg, *Sundance,* 5. Ellison, *Repent Harlequin! Said the Ticktockman,* 6. Philip Jose Farmer, *Riders of the Purple Wage.*

—Phyllis Wallingford
Houston, TX

RUNNERS UP

DIVORCE AMERICAN STYLE

Stephen Demerest looked at the textured sky. The battle ship was eight hundred feet in diameter and slightly more than one mile long. She was lovely and graceful and serene, but it wouldn't have mattered if she were none of these. She was flowing hot and naked and she straddled his belly in the cuddletube and fed him her hard little tits.

They held their breath. June morning 5 A.M. *In re Glover* finally reached the Supreme Court.

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1. Isaac Asimov, *Waterclap*, 2. Eric Frank Russell, *...And Then There Were None*, 3. Ray Russell, *The Better Man*, 4. James Tiptree, Jr., *The Milk of Paradise*, 5. Edward Wellen, *Down by the Old Maelstrom*, 6. Ken McCullough, *Chuck Berry, Won't You Please Come Home*, 7. Leonard Tushnet, *In Re Glover*.

—Kenneth Schulze
Rocky River, OH

COME TO ME NOT IN WINTER'S WHITE BOXER SHORTS

The dead man drifted along in the breeze. A bizarrerie of fires, Cunabulum of light, it moved with a deft, almost dainty deliberation, phasing into and out of existance like a storm-shot piece of evening; or perhaps the darkness between the flares was more akin to its truest nature — swirl of black ashes assembled in prancing cadence to the lowing note of desert wind down the arroyo behind buildings as empty yet filled as the pages of unread books or stillnesses between the notes of a song. That was the damdest December I ever saw in New York.

1. Brian Aldiss, *Earthworks*, 2. Roger Zelazny, *The Unicorn Variation*, 3. Damon Knight, *A Likely Story*.

—Jeff Grimshaw
Brooklyn, NY

IF ADAM AND EVE WERE FIRST, HOW COME THERE'S A RUSSIAN IN THE GARDEN?

Her name was Eve. I knew she was a virgin because she was able to ruffle the silken mane of my unicorn. At this point, confronted with the whole complicated affair of Nikolai Vassilevitch's wife, I am overcome by hesitation. I keep thinking there must be some place for me somewhere.

1. Robert Silverberg, *Eve and the Twenty-Four Adams*, 2. Harlan Ellison, *On the Downhill Side*, 3. *Tommaso Landolfi, Gogol's Wife*, 4. Carol Emshwiller, *Chicken Icarus*.

—Augustine Funnell
Fredericton, Canada

SPECIALTY OF THE HOUSE: OYSTERS

It was a slow night at the Vulgar Unicorn. Tarzan of the Apes paused to listen and to sniff the air. "I really do think, Mr. Carnelian, that we should at least *try* them raw, don't you?"

1. Robert Asprin, *Shadows of Sanctuary*, 2. E. R. Burroughs, *Tarzan at the Earth's Core*, Michael Moorcock, *The End of All Songs*.

—Kevin Roach
Bryan, TX

COMPETITION 39 (suggested by Stephen Mendenhall)

Finish this sentence: "You know you've *really* landed in an alternate universe when you discover that . . ."

". . . Einstein won the Hugo award in 1905."

". . . Napoleon defeated Wellington at the BAttle of Omaha."

Please limit yourself to a dozen entries.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by November 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 39 will appear in the March Issue.

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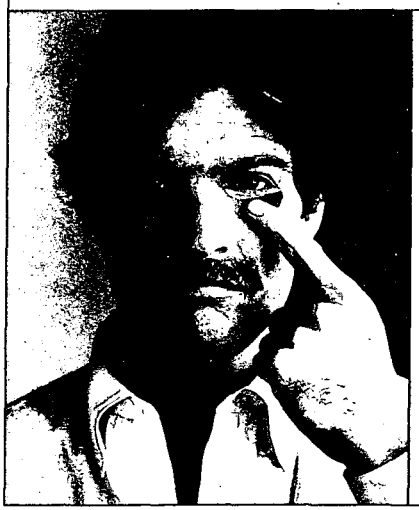

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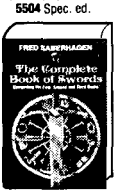

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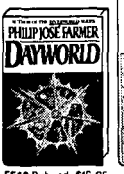

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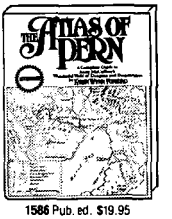

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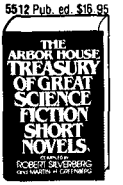

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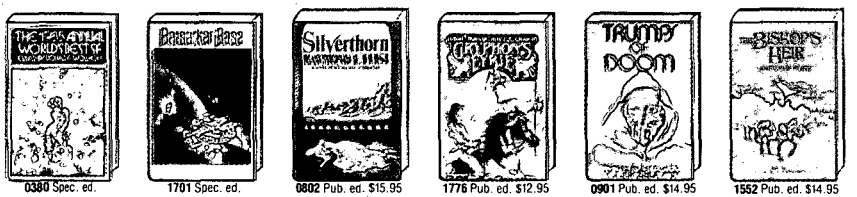

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